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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SORROW, SING SORROW

BY

EUNICE VICTORIA SCARFE ©

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING 1990

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SORROW, SING SORROW

SUBMITTED BY

EUNICE VICTORIA SCARFE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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for Chris

1941 - 1988

ABSTRACT

This collection of connected stories portrays a Lutheran community of Norwegian ancestry living in North America in the middle of the twentieth century and explores some of the issues which religion claims to interpret for its advocates.

The Christian/Protestant tradition which these Lutherans inherit emphasizes commitment to the principle of Love as embodied in the New Testament rather than adherence to the letter of the Law which characterizes the Old Testament. While acknowledging the absolute, and daunting, ambiguity in practicing the principle of Love, this religious tradition also provides many and ironic examples of disregard for the very foundation on which it is based. The intent in these stories is not just to explore the gap between the preaching and the practice of Love in religious community - between belief and behavior - but also to raise questions about how the world is experienced and interpreted by those who live within religious community.

What is the relation, for example, usually disguised and/or denied, between the expression of spirituality and of sensuality/sexuality? How does religion shape the understanding and experience of Death? How do Word and Song function as ways of defining, or confining, the experience of the world? How have boundaries established or endorsed by the religious community (boundaries of sex, race, culture, custom, doctrine, church

membership) inhibited or enabled the practice or expression of Love by the community? What possibility exists within a patriarchal tradition for opening up spaces for the experience and expression or even the presence of women? How does an authoritarian tradition make room for its children? What is the relation between ethics and ethnicity in Protestant communities established among immigrant populations in North America?

This manuscript mirrors the method used by the text of the Christian religion to define itself, that of Story, though religious community has ironically often been impatient not only with the ambiguity of its own story but also suspicious of making Story itself, a form which has little place, or few instances of production, during the generations this particular religious community has existed in North America. The absence of making Story may admittedly have as much to do with circumstance (poverty, immigration, education) as with the practice of its religion.

The stories are narrated by Elizabeth, youngest daughter of a clergyman, and Anne, youngest daughter of a musician (composer, conductor, organist). The friendship between the two girls is in stark contrast to the isolation of Peter, son of an ordained missionary.

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THE NIGHT WE SANG THE *UNA SANCTA*

6 June 1960. Minneapolis. Three men joined hands in Convention Hall Saturday, symbolizing the union of the Norwegian, Danish and German Lutheran churches into the new American Lutheran Church.

There would never be another celebration like it.

And if it hadn't been for the singing of the Una Sancta, there wouldn't have been a celebration at all.

The Constituting Convention would have finished on Saturday and the one thousand delegates, weary and hot from five days of debate and discussion, would have all gone home. The men who had come to forge the new church were proud of themselves on that sixth day of June. They had done the job: the Germans, the Norwegians and the Danes were finally one, willing to melt ethnic pride and persuasion in order to be identified by doctrine and practice rather than country or language of origin. At noon on the first Saturday in June 1960 The American Lutheran Church was born. Delegates held hands and sang "The Church's One Foundation" and some of the streaks running down hot faces were tears and not sweat.

"Why don't we all march around convention hall seven times?" old Torgrimsom said, grinning to himself. "Let the trumpets sound. Let the walls between us fall down."

The delegates were tired. Many didn't want to stay for Sunday, for the service at Mt. Olivet Lutheran where communion would be served continuously from 9 until noon. Not everyone wanted to eat at the smorgasbords prepared by Faith, Bethel and

Peace Lutheran from 1 til 5 in the afternoon, and though they all wanted to attend the Una Sancta cantata that evening, most wanted to be getting on home.

But the singers were coming for the concert.

They were travelling from every corner of the country, humming the words under their breath. Wearing flat shoes and carrying colourful robes. Guiding children, greeting each other. Carrying tins of fattigman and lefse to add to the smorgasbord tables. Staying with relatives or sleeping in the basements of churches.

They were coming from as far away as Nome, Alaska and Miami Beach, Florida; from Seattle, Washington and Richmond, Virginia. They were coming from the Dakotas and the Carolinas; from Vermont and from Nevada. They were coming from the Fox River and the Red. Like the people of Israel meeting to cross the River Jordan, they were coming by the thousands, crossing the hot country by car, by Greyhound bus and by train.

For the week preceding the singing of the Una Sancta the Empire Builder leaving daily from Chicago was called the Lutheran Line. Families rode for a flat rate: $29.00 each return and supper for the whole family was free. In the dining car the waiters waited for grace before they served the meals, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow" or "Now Thank We all our God" and once all the children sang the Johnny Appleseed grace. The singing continued in the cars in the evening, 'noisy' the Great Northern attendants said, noisy but nice. You couldn't say the Lutherans weren't nice. Someone usually stood on a velour seat and led the rest in "How Great Thou Art" or "A Mighty Fortress" just before the train reached the Cities. Conductors hummed those notes for weeks after the Lutherans left, though none of them knew the words.

prepare ye, prepare ye, prepare ye

No delegate left before the singing of the Una Sancta on that Sunday night in June.

All stayed.

And the story of the Una Sancta singing was told to the children and to the children's children, the story of the night the new Church was sung into One.

The fundamental work of the new Church is to preach the Gospel.

Harold needed me so I went. There was nothing more than that in it. His voice failed and so I spoke. I pronounced the words for him, that's all.

I left Harold early in the month of June, just after school got out. I took the girls and went to my sister Margaret's in Marah. Our congregation thought I was on vacation before the church convention at the end of June. But I wasn't on vacation. I had gone for good.

And then Harold was chosen to read the 'Voice of the Lord' for the Una Sancta cantata, the greatest honour he could receive, and I had to join him for that, didn't I? He drove to Minneapolis in the Plymouth. Alone. I took the Greyhound bus to the Cities with Margaret and the girls and we met at the Curtis where a suite had been reserved. For the three white days preceding the Cantata he did not speak. "I'm saving my voice," he wrote on a scrap of paper. "I don't know how much is left."

He drank lemon tea and smeared his chest with Vicks and wrapped hot socks around his throat and rested. The truth is, I have to say it, he hadn't spoken to me for weeks and weeks before I left, and then he had a voice. But I didn't mention that.

"Imagine streams of living water," I said. "That should make your throat feel better. Remember, God will provide," I said to him. "You have been chosen for tonight."

He touched me oftener during those three days than he had for months. Touching my hand in the day; at night fastening his arms around me. It was fear that made him do it. I knew his fear: how could he be a minister of God - a pastor of the people, a preacher of the Word, a clergyman of the Church - if he had no voice? He did not sleep with me - as if you need a voice to speak the language of the body. "No, Mary, no," he whispered and turned on the light. He read far into the night and in the morning newsprint fanned across the sheets and spread onto the floor. He slept under the mocking silence of their words til late in the afternoons while the choirs rehearsed and we waited for the Sunday. Margaret and I and the girls visited with Aunt Orpha and walked around Lake Cormorant and drank lemonade in frosted coca cola glasses at the cafe in the hotel.

"No, Mary."

"No what, Harold?"

I didn't go on stage to give myself a voice. I went because Harold needed me. I'm so nervous of standing up in front of people that I get wobbly knees even when I give Bible Study at the Ladies Aid. The Lord made me stand before 8,000 people. Only the Lord, and Harold needing me, could have made me do that.

But I was harshly criticized.

They said women should keep silent in the churches. They said my speaking 'I am the Voice of the Lord' was as presumptous as having women serve communion, or even be ordained. They said some people wanted to withdraw from the merger when they saw a woman sharing the podium on the last night of the convention.

They said when I read 'There is neither male nor female, we are all one' that I was trying to announce a new age. They said that if I had sat up in the balcony with the other ministers' wives this never would have happened.

Joe didn't say that. He came and kissed my cheek afterwards, even hugged me, and comfort is hard to come by from the men who grow up in our kind of church. You see, when Harold couldn't say the words I saw the look on Joe's face. The spotlight was on Harold alone but from the front row I could see Joe's profile in the dark, waiting to bring the choir in. And I remembered Joe's calm, composed and chiselled face while he directed us in the choir at Holy Spirit. And I remembered him playing the organ, his face stiff with concentration and his hands as graceful as a seagull's flight. And I have always wanted to place my hands on either of Joe's cheeks and say 'Joe, look at me, look at me - _Mary_'. But I will never say the words to him and he will never see.

I didn't want to see another gulf grow between Joe and Harold - and me. And so I went. And so I spoke the words.

Imagine me, Mary, speaking for the Lord!

Harold wouldn't talk to me afterwards. He looked away when I tried to catch his eye. He shook his arm loose when I reached for his hand. That night I lay alone in the twin bed watching the white moon mark the sky. In the middle of the night I awoke and felt him sinking down on me, like a coffin closing.

He emptied hurt and anger and regret, then left. There wasn't any love in it, and certainly no acknowledgment. Had I awakened sooner I would have sent him away. He had voice enough to speak, but he didn't speak to me, not once, and when he left the moon had barely moved from the middle of the window pane, so little time he was with me.

When I awoke in the morning he had already checked out of the hotel. I went back to Marah with my sister Margaret and the girls. The Minneapolis Tribune had our picture on the front page that morning, the two of us together on the platform of convention hall. "Now they are one" the headline caption read.

That's when the calls began.

We believe that man is utterly unable to save himself. He can be saved only by God's grace.

Anne Abrams

The night we sang the *Una Sancta* my mother said we should be ready to have our hair braided by 5.30. My Gran always does the oldest - Liv and Astrid and Solveig - and Mother does Kristi, Karina, Dagny and me, Anna Marie. I'm glad Mother does *my* braids. She doesn't pull tight like Gran and she stops to talk while the rat tail comb sticks out of her mouth, holding my braids poised in her hands. When she finishes, our braids are loose and uneven and never stretch our skin. Gran's are as tight and perfectly patterned as stitching on a sewing machine, and as hard to get out. Gran's braids last at least three days; my mother's don't last one.

I washed my hair last and my hair was wet when my turn came. "Please can I leave it loose?" I whispered to Mother.

She looked at me. She always considers things, even if she's going to say no. "It's too wet," she said. "Your back will be soaked. Why did you wash it so late, Annie?"

You know why I washed it so late, I know you do.

You know what shining ripples we can make if we braid our hair when it's wet, what magnificent waves erupt when we unloose the bands. You know why I washed it so late and you know why I undid my braids before the singing of the *Una Sancta* began.

You too have thrown your head back and felt your hair touch your thigh while you shivered in surprise. You too have swept your hair like feathers across your skin and have felt wet strands slide like searching fingers down your body. Like mine, your hair has palmed your back, searching each curve, and has slid across your skin like a slow wind, soft and warm as breath. You too, I know, have stood in front of a full-length mirror and have wrapped yourself with hair, stroked it smooth against your skin, felt your nipples rise under fine lines of shifting silk.

You know. I have only to remind you.

And to ask. How can our bodies be temples if our hair is knit so tightly against unyielding bone of scalp that it cannot swirl or bend or give?

Temples must be beautiful.

I know you know that too.

To tell the truth, I didn't want to go to the _Una Sancta_ service. Hadn't I heard every note a thousand times before the singing started on that hot white night in June? Hadn't I heard my father composing at the piano and auditioning for a minister to read the Voice of the Lord?

I had already seen Paul Bjornson's sketches for the 'Faith of our Fathers' mural. My father said for once there'd be a space big enough for Paul's work. He could have the whole front of convention hall, he could make the men larger than life, he could put everyone on since Adam, he could do it any way he liked.

"But I don't do faces terribly well," Paul had said.

"I won't work with anyone else, Paul," my father had said. "And the committee wants 'Faith of our Fathers'. I don't much like it either, to tell the truth."

"I prefer something less prescribed, more abstract..."

"More accurate," my mother had said quietly.

And my father had said, laughing, "Make them all with their backs to us, then. Walking away. Marching to the promised land. Then you wouldn't have to paint their faces, Paul."

And my mother had said slowly, "'Now we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.'" Her voice beat out the familiar words. "You could put them all in a fog, Paul. Then you wouldn't have to paint faces either." And she had put her hand on Paul's arm and left it there until she knew he didn't mind their words. "Besides," she said, and I could hear her words come warm and fast, "then we could see the women better. Lot's wife - white as salt. Dinah in bridal white mourning the murder of Shechem. Tamar's white scream. Sarah inside the white canvas tent. Jephthah's daughter buried in a shroud of white. Miriam's body white with leprosy." And she said a lot more, fast and intense, but I didn't hear her words, I only felt the warmth. When Paul came a light turned on inside her, and you could see, and feel, light shining through her pale, translucent skin like the sun that shone through our white teepee in the summertime. My mother was ethereal, as if she were made of shadow and dream and hope, and not cells of flesh and blood. She was like a beacon and she drew people to her as if she were a magnet made of light.

So I knew exactly what convention hall would look like before that night began. All spring the seating plan had been spread on our living room floor like a great wheel. From the hub spread on our living room floor like a great wheel. From the hub my father would direct the choirs and above them would tower Paul's massive mural. Behind my father all the congregating peoples of the three synods would fan out like the spokes of a wheel, like streams coming into one river. One Church.

Una Sancta.

Hadn't I seen? All those long hot days of June before this night happened. Before the seven chimes sounded, one for each of my sisters, and the last for me, 'chime child' my father says, because I am the seventh.

So why did I go? I had seen and heard it all. But my mother said we all had to be there, all eight of us, even Mark who gets so terribly restless. Like the wings of a dove, she said, we'd sit on either side of her in the front row where seats had been reserved for us. This wasn't Sunday church, she said, where she was grateful if some of us stayed at home.

When we got to the auditorium we found new hymnbooks on each of our chairs, bright red and stamped in gold. My father had let us choose all the hymns for the processional. He said it would take at least half an hour to get everyone in. We had chosen "Children of the Heavenly Father" for the cherub choirs, "Thy Word is Like a Garden Lord" for the seminary students and "For All the Saints Who From Their Labours Rest" for the retired clergy. The students from the church colleges would enter on "Rise Up O Men of God" and for the missionaries - the ones that were home of furlough that is - we chose "From Greenland's Icy

Mountains". When the missionaries entered, I saw that one of the children had braids hanging to her waist, stiff as pitchfork prongs and as rigid. I made up my mind. I stood up just as the organ began "Built on a Rock the Church Doth Stand" and I knew the 1000 delegates would be entering any minute. I thought the sound would knock me down and around me, everywhere, I felt expectation and elation.

As I turned into the aisle the double doors at the back of the auditorium opened and the clergymen in black cassocks and white surplices and starched white collars swept in. They had marched all the way from Mt. Olivet where they had prayed together in one last show of unity. Their entry into the hall was like the arrival of a tidal wave. I met them halfway down the aisle and headed straight between them like I was the bow of a ship cutting through oncoming water. None of them noticed me. I could smell after-shave and talc and toothpaste, all of the ministers clean, as if they thought their bodies were temples of God. I could feel the smooth wool of their cassocks sweep against my legs and the white silk of their surplices swish against my taffeta skirt. I wanted to pull the ends of their embroidered stoles and make them uneven, or use them to brush the smiles off their faces. They were all carrying the new red hymnals, high in front of them, with their arms uplifted, though if you're a minister of the church you should know the words. I didn't have a hymnbook and I didn't need one.

> Jesus to us the Spirit sent,
> Making with us a covenant.

I sang loudly over their tenor and bass voices as I passed between the ministers. "I know my own, my own know me" and I let my body sway like a boat. I looked up and could see the huge balconies hanging above me and everyone in them was standing, sending their voices out over convention hall. At the organ Naomi Sande changed the stops with every stanza until for the last verse she pulled them all out and it was as loud as the trumpets that will announce the Judgement Day.

I entered the women's room singing "My peace I leave with you amen", pitching my voice round and low. At the sink was a girl washing her hands. She had braids too. Tight ones, nearly as long as mine and tied with blue ribbons at the end. She stared at me through the mirror as I began pulling out my braids.

"How will you get your braids in again?" she asks.

"Who wants to get them in again?" I ask. My head is bent and turned to one side. The wet strands are sticking together and I have started too high. "Help me, won't you?" I say.

She dries her hands carefully and starts low on the braid. I can tell she has done this before. You can't hurry braids. You have to unwind each strand. She is patient and careful and I don't feel a snarl once. "If you don't have a comb I can use my fingers," she says. And when I nod she smooths each strand until all my hair is lying loose.

"Now let's do yours," I say when she is finished.

"No, I don't want to," she says. "No."

I shrug my shoulders.

"Look," I say, and shiver like I have a chill. My hair slithers down my back. Then I toss my head to the left and my hair swings out. I toss to the right and it flies again, almost across her face. I lean forward and my hair makes a tent. Then I pull my hair across my face. "Guess whether I'm smiling or not," I say. "Guess."

"You're not," she says.

"I am too," I say.

She grins at me and I know she guesses that I wasn't.

"Where are you sitting?" I ask. "In the balcony?"

"No," she whispers. "I'm in the front row."

I stop and look at her very closely. I know the front row is reserved for the musician's family and for the family of the minister reading the 'Voice of the Lord'. "Styve," I say slowly. "Your father is Pastor Styve."

She nods. We look in the mirror. We are the image of each other: blond hair, blue eyes and tall. We could be sisters we look so much alike. "I'm Anna Marie. Anne. Do you have a Norwegian or a Bible name?"

"Bible," she says. "Elizabeth."

We grin at each other and look in the mirror and grin again. I close one eye and so does she. I bow to her and she bows back. "If you took your braids out we'd look like twins," I say.

"It's too late," she says. "We've got to get back."

The choirs are filling up the dark lobby when we come out of the women's room, choirs from congregations all over the country. "Come," I whisper and we climb up the stairs to the first landing where we can watch the choirs assembling. My hair feels as silky as the robes I see the singers wearing in shades of red and green and rust and blue with white or gold stoles or none at all. We hear the organ playing the prelude for the choirs. The 8,000 people in the hall, the church choirs in the lobby, the ministers and interns, the missionaries and seminary students, the college choirs on the stage, the trustees and deacons and college presidents and professors - and Elizabeth and I - hold our breath. And then in one voice the whole assembly begins: "Praise to the Lord the Almighty the King of Creation".

Elizabeth and I sit down on the top stair when the first stanza begins. By the second stanza our feet are beating in time to the music. By the third stanza I am on my feet and circling a waltz: 1-2-3 Health and salvation; 1-2-3 Glad adoration. I take her hand and swing her as if we were turning a square dance corner. 1-2-3 Wondrously reigneth; 1-2-3 Gently sustaineth. My hair is flying around my shoulders like curtains in the wind. She is giggling without making any noise and though she looks worried she is keeping up with me.

"Take mine out," she whispers as we meet to join hands again. And I quickly undo the rubber bands and slide my fingers through the twists. As soon as I'm done we swing in a circle one more time before we fly down the stairs, each of us balancing against one of the brass bannisters, laughing as our hair sweeps out behind us like the wings of angels.

The last robe is moving through the doors as we take our place. We don't need a hymnbook. We know the words as well as any of the ministers, as well as any choir member. We are daughters of the church, children of the Heavenly Father. We hold hands instead and take our first step into the hall together: "All ye who hear Now to the Temple draw near."

My father is high on the podium at the center of the stage. The black tails of his tuxedo are swaying in time to the music. I can see his hands moving between the heads of the singers marching down the aisle in front of us. He looks like Moses with his arms uplifted, holding the advantage for Israel. Each pair of singers parts as they reach the rows where the church choir members are to sit. When the singers in front of us separate I am looking straight at my father. He is so astonished that his arms stop moving and "Ponder anew" is held by every singer in the hall while we smile up at him, holding the note as long as all his singers do, and smiling at him too.

My father motions for the singing to continue and walks down the stairs towards us. By the time the audience finishes the stanza, he is standing between us, holding one of our hands in each of his. In silence we walk to the stairs, and then, still holding our hands, my father looks at the women. My father can let people know what he wants with a raised eyebrow or a turn of his head. I have seen it a hundred times since then. The two women in the center, smiling at him, move slightly apart. My father guides us towards the stairs. I look up at him to make sure and then I take Elizabeth's hand and we go slowly up the stairs. For a moment there is not a sound in the entire auditorium except the tapping of our patent leather shoes on the makeshift wooden stairs. We are welcomed into the center between the blue velvet robes of my father's college singers and I feel a woman's arm slide around me. I position my feet apart like you must do when you sing in the choir and I hold Elizabeth's hand as tightly as she holds mine. I am staring into spotlights and I cannot see beyond the circumference of the stage.

And then my father enters the circle of light. He looks back and forth along the rows of the singers, from face to face, as if he sees them one by one.

I know he makes the eyes of all the singers soften as they watch him, but not a muscle moves on any face. He nods his head and I hear a chord. There's a rustling of robes and a shuffling of feet, as if a message had been sent - and received. And I hear the words 'Den Store Hvide Flok' as certainly as if they have been spoken in my ear, which they have not. And I see my father's arm go up as quickly as a bird in flight, and pause, and all around me I hear a quick intake of breath, and then the women and only the women begin to sing the soft harmonious syllables.

Who is this host arrayed in white/
Like thousand snowclad mountains bright?
That stands with palms and sings its psalms/
Before the throne of light?

My father smiles at Elizabeth and me and we join in, our bodies swaying back and forth as if we were on a swing, rocking in time to the rhythm.

"See with new eyes the pattern in the seed."

I know this hymn is not on the program and I know it hasn't been rehearsed. But the women know all the words, every stanza, and so do we, Elizabeth and I, and we sing in unison, as one voice, our voices filling the hall with white velvet.

O blessed saints, now take your rest;
A thousand times shall you be blest.

My mother has sung this song to us as a bedtime lullaby and our family has sung it together in the car, often at night and perhaps after attending a concert of my father's. I have heard my parents sing it together, both of them at the piano and playing it together. I remember singing it at my grandfather's funeral and I remember the sobbing in the church when the congregation finished the last verse. I have heard my mother sing the words, sitting alone in the dark living room at home. I know the words to all the verses as well as I know the letters in the alphabet, and so do all the women who are singing unaccompanied and in unison.

When we finish, the audience rises to its feet. But there is no clapping. Only silence. And many of them are crying and I see my father is.

He bows to the audience, very low, and so does every singer on the stage. And then my father turns to the choir and he looks at me. And I know. I squeeze Elizabeth's hand in case she doesn't know, and together we bow, just the two of us, and the hall is silent still.

Then my father climbs the stairs of the podium and with lifted and energetic arms conducts the last stanza of the processional hymn.

> Praise to our God who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
> Shelters thee under soft wings yea so gently sustaineth.
> Hast thou not seen?

I have seen. That night I saw.

I saw Song. I saw Harmony.

Song is visible, indivisible. Song is before the Word and without the Word; Song is from the Beginning and in the Beginning. And in Song is the Harmony that makes the fragments one, that makes the broken whole.

In the silence after we had finished, I heard the clear call of the chime. Like a knife slicing clean. Seven times. And the seventh for me, chime child, sounding the night I became a singer, the night we sang the _Una Sancta_, that night unlike all other nights I have sung.

As the primary condition of union, we declare our unanimous and unreserved acceptance of all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God.

Afterwards, Margaret said she wished she hadn't gone, or at least hadn't sat in the front row. Harold's one chance to redeem himself and he had to throw it away. Like Lord Jim he didn't know how to use a second chance. Margaret knew she was to forgive 70 times 7 but Margaret hadn't forgiven Harold the first time and she certainly wasn't prepared to forgive this time. Or forget. You could forgive sins someone didn't mean to do, or sins someone was truly contrite for, or sins when someone was overcome with anger or lust - well perhaps not lust - but did you have to forgive stupidity?

Mary shouldn't have rescued Harold. Let him stand there in silence, so rare it would have been a jewel any other time. Like a black opal. No, Mary had to go and help. Make herself conspicuous. Be his handmaiden. Their picture was in the newspaper, just the two of them, Mary wearing her white linen suit and discreet hat and Harold in a tuxedo of all things. It was rented and ill-fitted and hung on him as if he expected to grow into it in time. The St. Paul Standard and the Minneapolis Tribune ran the picture and so did every other major paper once the AP picked it up. "They are now one" ran the banner, the theme of the convening convention. As if Harold had ever been one with anybody - he always had to be different.

The backlash against Mary was huge, surprisingly. You'd think Harold would be criticized for spoiling the opening of the

Una Santa. But Mary was criticized more. She had stepped out of place by sharing the podium. Her sister had meant well, but she was so naive. A woman on stage reading "Ye are all one", as if the new church was going to share the pulpit with women. If Mary had sat with the other 'prestefruer', this never would have happened.

The single spotlight was to have been on Harold alone, chosen from among hundreds of applications to be the Voice of the Lord. "And Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart..." Harold was to say - and couldn't. Like a wasted wedding night, Margaret thought, though what did she know of that? He squawked and coughed. He tried a hoarse whisper. And then he looked into the spotlight so pitifully, so apologetically, as speechless as the pillars of the church depicted in Paul's quite outlandish, and certainly quite unfinished, mural which was spread across the back of convention hall. The only thing Harold had in common with Paul Bjornson's white-faced fathers was that Harold was speechless too. Eight thousand people waiting to hear the familiar words of the new commandment, eight thousand people sealing their Christian commitment in merger, forgetting their differences of language and history and custom and pride. Forging papers of doctrine and praxis, gathering like the tribes of Israel. And Mary went up, as if she was the angel of the Lord sent to bring Glad Tidings to all the world, when only Harold was supposed to speak.

Margaret was opposed to the merger. When the church fathers voted to merge, none of the women had been allowed to vote. Margaret remembers her mother crying when the synod voted to abandon Norwegian as the official language of the church more than thirty years ago. None of the women had voted then either. "We have to learn to be more Christian and less Norwegian," her mother had said, "but I can't help crying. They won't even be conducting confirmation in Norwegian. Where will it end?"

Margaret thought it was ending now. Everything she cared about was going. She knew by heart every hymn in the blue hymnbook and it was being replaced. They weren't just adding hymns from the other two synods, they were leaving some out, like "Blessed Assurance" and "I Come to the Garden Alone". She knew Joe Abrams was responsible and she knew he was responsible for adding a liturgy that sounded just like the Catholics. And probably he was responsible for the garish red cover too.

And worse, the organizations for women were being dismantled. The men had no right to tamper with those. Margaret had been a member of the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation since the first chapter was formed at St. Olaf, since Shishmaref way up in the Arctic was chosen as their special mission project. What would happen to Shishmaref now?

And joining the Germans meant that drinking would be approved by the church. She'd heard some of their ministers even had beer at pastoral conferences.

But worst was the idea of the Church itself. Margaret thought of the Church as a sanctuary, a place to turn into for solace and support and comfort with others like yourself. But the way some people were talking the Church was a place to go out of. There was talk of voter registration in the South and even taking communion with other churches.

Margaret had heard that some congregations across the country had refused to join the merger. One even planned to restore Norwegian for its worship service. Margaret was going to inquire.

The truth was, Margaret hadn't wanted to go to the _Una Sancta_. She disliked excess. She disliked the sight of singers, all with their feet spread apart and their mouths open like fish gasping for air and their faces flushed with pride. Choirs should be heard, Margaret thought, not seen. Their place was in the balcony.

Most of all she hated the trembling she felt deep inside herself every time the men sang alone. She felt like a wall of water was engulfing her. She didn't like that feeling in church. She didn't _ever_ like that feeling.

She had wanted to stay home in Marah that Sunday. She didn't need to go to Minneapolis with all the others, like lemmings to the sea, seeking the thrill of mass celebration.

And then Harold was chosen to be the Voice and Margaret found herself witnessing another disaster of Harold's. You can't walk out when you're sitting in the front row, when God himself has been invoked - at least that's what Harold was supposed to have done.

Margaret stayed, though afterwards she said she wished she hadn't.

The Church is the assembly of a people redeemed. Lost in sin, under the domination of the devil, the world, and the flesh, these people have been claimed by God.

therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify thy glorious name everymore praising thee and saying

That night I stopped breathing.

When breath began again my heart slid down slowly and has stayed down ever since, beating the echo of the music in thick and hollow chords. The beating never stops. My blood moves in rhythm to the song, joyful and insistent, unable to return to its former even and oblivious flow. I have tried to hoist my heart back to its normal hollow behind the bone on which my breast is hung, I have slung upside down on trees and fences and waited for my heart to return along its chosen path, I have tried to suck it up, to drag it up, to wrench it from its hollow hiding place. But it stays hidden deep within me as if it needs nourishment and a sanctuary. My heart beats unevenly in the center and you can tell by my walk that all is not right. You can tell, if you look, that a spring has been coiled in dozens of tight and tiny turns and every step of mine is an awkward unwinding of a rhythm I have not chosen for myself.

I can sometimes feel my heart slide lower, stopping up outlet and access. I have only to hear a chord of plainsong or chant or chorale and my heart swells to twice its normal size and in its thick lethargic way throbs to keep up, to get and give and see again the glory of that night.

all ye who hear

What is seen cannot be unseen nor what is heard unheard.

And the Glory that is given cannot be returned.

Her father beckoned every woman in the choir to sing the melody in unison, not a single male voice among them.

I shivered. The melody rose like the full moon rising; our voices lifted like a benediction given.

That's when I stopped breathing. That's when my heart sank. That's when I heard the Glory: white as milk and hard as steel and enduring as eternity. A sweet humming, a harmony of time. My veins were emptied of blood and filled with song, gentle and delicate and soft. We stood in the center and the singers surrounding us wound strands of words and skeins of notes, knitting us inside undulating mantles of song.

The glory of the only begotten Child of God cannot be both heard and seen at once. You must choose to hear or see. I chose to hear. That night I closed my eyes and clenched them tightly shut. I didn't see my mother rise and join my father in the spotlight at the podium. I didn't see my mother put her hand over my father's trembling one. I didn't see her lift her eyes to the furthest balcony. I didn't see the look of anger and irritation on my Aunt Margaret's face. I didn't see the spotlight centered on my parents - he in black and she in white linen, both somber and correct. I didn't see Anne's father lift his hands and bring in the assembled choirs: "Prepare ye, prepare ye, prepare ye" repeated like a peppered echo from the dozen different choirs answering antiphonally.

With my ears I heard. I heard my mother's calm convincing voice proclaim the words: "I am the Voice of one that crieth in the wilderness." I heard the music thunder like an avalanching waterfall. I heard myself surrounded by a web wound so tightly I will never escape. I heard.

You cannot both see and hear.

I, Elizabeth, I heard.

Someday I will slide a silver hook towards the center of my heart's dark hiding place and I will stealthily retrieve my heart - my aching absent joyful always beating heart.

The work of the Church is the extension of the Gospel in the hearts of men.

Silje Abrams

The sundress I wore last night was blue, navy and bold in its intensity. When I came back from the auditorium I stuffed it into a hotel pillow case and dropped it down the laundry chute. Somewhere someone will wonder whose hands finger-printed the folds of my skirt and patterned the cloth of the bodice. Whose fingers whitened the straps and whose palms gathered the waist. Somewhere someone will wonder, even now while the choirs assemble and sing. And somewhere in this hall someone is watching me, remembering, as oblivious as I am tonight to this unifying ceremony in song.

Last night this hall was a sanctuary of solitude and silence.

Last night the only watchers were the faceless figures in the cloud of witnesses.

Last night we had no need of pageantry to restore the spirit and we spoke without a script or score, unaccompanied and in whispers. In unison. Una Voce.

'prepare ye, prepare ye, prepare ye'

Last night we needed silence, not cacophony of sound.

Last night we needed no delegate to act on our behalf.

And for our communion we had the body's presence, not the promise of it.

Last night I came alone to the auditorium after I had bathed and fed the children. I knew he'd be here. I knew I'd find him pacing back and forth to see the mural from every angle. His fists would be clenched and his face set in a line and he would be furious that it wasn't the way he imagined it should be.

I knew I had been too hard on him, and I came to say I was sorry.

"You've done a real nice job, Paul," I had said to him before the panels were shipped to Minneapolis. "But I don't want to sit in the front row with the church fathers watching me, three times larger than life, a smug and impenetrable wall of authority - imposing, somber and, I have to say it Paul, dull."

"Not dull, Silje."

"You can't help it, Paul. The subject matter's dull."

"I had to do the church fathers, Silje. I didn't have a choice."

"Where are the women, Paul? That's what I want to know. Why don't you put in Lot's wife? A pillar of salt, all in white. No one would notice. Add a dozen, while you're at it. All her sisters. For me, Paul."

When I arrived, I tiptoed up the stairs to the third balcony, in the dark, guided by the smooth brass banisters which cooled my hands. The heat was stifling and increased as I climbed. There was no air conditioning or open window in the hall, and by the time I reached the top my clothes clung to my body like a second skin.

The minute I saw him I knew what he was doing. Three step ladders were on the stage, and brooms and mops and brushes, and one huge bucket filled with whitewash. He had painted out almost everyone before I arrived: Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and his twelve sons, Moses and his kinsman Aaron, David and Solomon, the Gospel writers, the twelve disciples, Peter and Paul. While I watched he climbed up the step ladder and began erasing Luther, slowly and deliberately. He used the broom to reach the face, one long stroke and the features disappeared. Another and the brush tonsured the head and left a cowl of white. And then I saw Paul lean into angle of the step ladder, and stare into the faceless visage, long and hard.

When he climbed down the ladder he dipped his hands into the bucket of white poster paint and stroked his hands down his own face and neck, as if he were trying to cool his skin, and then he sat down on the steps with his back to the mural and his head in his hands. Behind him the figures had become the rigid outline of a wrought iron fence. All that was left of the fathers was a black pattern, like a line of print. And Paul himself looked so small he could have slipped between any one of the elongated marmoreal figures.

I watched him for a moment and then I leaned forward and rested my elbows on the edge of the balcony. I sent the question softly out to him. "Who is this Host arrayed in white?" And my voice was like a leaf floating down. When the attenuated melody reached Paul, I watched his head drop as he listened, and I knew his eyes, for a moment, would be closed, listening, seeing me. And then he stood and reached his white hands towards the balcony, to me, his eyes searching the dark. And he called my name, first softly and then insistently. "Silje?" And I heard the syllables as soft as whisper or a sigh. And for a moment he and I were as fixed and still as statues.

I knew he was afraid to leave the stage where he could see the sound of me. I knew he was afraid to move for fear I would be gone before he reached the highest balcony. I began singing, very softly, 'Abide with me', and I was smiling as I sang and as I watched him listening. He jumped off the stage and the words he sent to me weren't melody, they were petition. "Silje, I'm coming. Don't go."

I knew he would come bounding up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I knew he would find me in the dark, guided by song to my hand.

I brushed my hands over the thick crown of my hair. The pins fell out like they were drawn to a magnet and my damp hair fell cool and heavy on my shoulders.

'Sing a song of expectation...'

He knew I would be waiting.

And I was.

There must be a quickening of life in the new Church.

UNTO US

This is Elizabeth's aunt.

In the sturdy rocking chair beating an impatient refrain on wide leather armrests.

On the landing, locking the door, hiding the key above the lintel where anyone can see.

At the kitchen table, sipping Postum from a china cup, enviously reading stories of service and grace.

In front of the hall mirror, brushing auburn hair severely from her face until it falls in rich excess, unwanted and ignored.

On the summer porch, one bare arm across her eyes, listening by the hour to Mary's broken words.

In the brass bed, sleeping, while the solemn eyes of all the family watch her from the wall.

On Sunday mornings, wearing lace-up oxfords, swinging her lean body evenly along to worship at the church.

This is the aunt, so many years ago.

Good aunt, wounded aunt, Margaret Ingeborg Jorgenson, carrying goodness like a sword: sheathed and sharp and lethal.

Margaret stands in the dark, bends her head into the steam which rises from the kettle on the stove and watches the blue halo of flame. The thick waves of her hair soften and fall with the steam. How many times have she and Mary curled their hair over a kettle? "Watch yourself!" she would say to her sister. "Don't get so close. Steam can burn. Don't close your eyes for a moment."

Mary, who had to stand on a stool to reach the steam, would hold her head in the mist until her dark curls were moist and waved. "You closed your eyes!" Margaret would say. "You'll scald yourself if you don't watch." Mary would smile, her eyes still closed, and dip her head again.

The whistle blows, thin and rasping. Margaret can make the cup of Postum now, a dark cup to drink while standing by the window. How long will she have to wait for Harold to get Mary into town? To know whether they met the snowplow on the Jamestown highway west of town? To see the 1936 Plymouth Harold had been given by the congregation his first year as pastor of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church?

"You have to give it back, of course," Margaret had said to Harold. "It belongs to the church."

"Not anymore," he had grinned, defiant and eager to defend himself. "It belongs to me. They take my pulpit from me, my home, my future — I have a right to the car."

"Nobody took anything from you," she had retorted. "You threw it all away."

Margaret moves down the hall, wrapping a mohair shawl around her shoulders before stepping out into the enclosed porch. The hide-a-bed springs are bare; the three walls of windows are opaque with frost. She scrapes a square of window clean.

The sky is dark, moonless and silent. Not a single car is moving anywhere tonight. The beam of the snowplow, the light she is looking for, has not appeared. She peers west until her breath ices the pane, anger shaking through her once again. How _dare_ he start out?

All this worry is needless. Why hadn't Harold stayed at the farmhouse? Birth at home was better than birth in a snowdrift. Pity her poor sister.

Margaret walks slowly through the dark hall to the sitting room. 'Meet us at the corner,' Harold had said. 'I'm setting out with Mary. We want to leave Rebecca and Naomi with you. Mary has to get to the hospital!'

He didn't say 'Would you meet the girls, Margaret?' He said, 'Meet the girls.' Always giving orders. 'Quick, do this, do that, hurry!'

Likely Harold believed Mary could delay her delivery if he ordered her to, as he thought he could order the plow to appear, the roads to clear, and the temperature to thaw so he could make the trip in triumph. Harold was always looking for a chance to walk on water, turn water into wine, break a loaf and feed five thousand. And in the absence of miracles he created emergencies;

coercing himself and everyone near him to prove the impossible was not.

Margaret thinks she should have gotten Mary into town before the winter began. There would have been plenty of room for Mary and the little girls. Harold could have stayed on the farm by himself.

In the sitting room the phone rings twice. Margaret answers coolly, just the right tone of irritation in her 'hello'.

"Margaret, is that you? Can you see the road? Has the snowplow gotten through?" Not Harold - Silje, her voice warm but cautious.

Can Margaret see the road? Silje knows she can. Hadn't Silje lived here until they built the big house?

Silje. Calling her! Silje's voice is gentle, always inviting Margaret to forgive, but Margaret holds the hurt as carefully as a hard and precious jewel.

"Margaret?" Silje says again. "I need to get to the hospital tonight. I'm going to be early with this one." Hospital? Not pregnant again. What a waste. That's how little she sees Silje, not even to know. Already there were six. Was Joe trying to make a madrigal group? Silje and Mary both giving birth tonight. Eight between the two of them already, always occupied with babies.

"Joe says we won't be able to get the car out, perhaps not for days. He thinks we should hitch a ride with the plow! I thought you could tell me if it's come past. He'll pull me on the tobaggon if it hasn't." She laughs like a child going out to play. "Would you call me if you see it? We're going to leave as soon as I get my things together."

Yes, Margaret would call her. Of course.

Not even to know Silje was pregnant! Has it been that long since she's seen her? Margaret comes late to church and sits in the back. She changed her Bible study group so she wouldn't have to be in Silje's group. She won't sing in the choir, though Silje always calls in September and says they need another alto. Margaret knows no choir ever needs another alto. Margaret sits with the receiver in her hand, listening to Silje's words long after she has hung up.

Silje used to be as close to her as a flower to its stalk. Running together across the college campus to reach Saturday vespers, singing together at the morning service, arguing about the meaning of 'all the world', deciding their senior year that they'd be missionaries together. How could she ever forget that Sunday night when Pastor Tollefson mesmerized them all with his words, empowered them with the Spirit of God and blessed them both as they knelt at the altar. Silje had forgotten.

Margaret puts the phone back on the hook.

One Saturday just before graduation they went down to the river to practice their presentation for Vespers, sat on felled logs, and watched the sober movement of the water. But Silje went silent, stared at the water and refused to prepare her talk.

"We have to practice, Silje. We've only got an hour."

But Silje looked at her, unseeing and silencing. As if she knew things she didn't need to practice or rehearse. As if the words should be forgotten.

"Stop talking, Margaret. Now. I mean please be quiet. I want to listen to the silence."

And then Silje walked by herself down to the water's edge, to the muddy spring water of the Red River where both of them had played since childhood, and started skipping stones, aiming for the bank on the other side. "We'll do all right, Margaret. Without practicing. Take off your shoes and let's walk in the water." Margaret worked hours on her devotions, struggled over the meanings of words, used the concordance, and memorized every verse of the Bible passage she read. She wasn't going to walk in the water. She was going to be ready. But that night Margaret gave devotions alone. Silje refused to leave the river, refused to come to Vespers at all.

Margaret rocks in the dark, more and more slowly.

She and Silje had gone to Chicago for language study after graduation. Sitting by the one air conditioner in the Mission Board House, they rehearsed the unfamiliar sounds of Telagu. Silje was a whiz, as good with words as with music and people and Joe - who called every Sunday afternoon from Marah where he was head of the new music department at the college.

"He's just a friend, Margaret. He knows we're alone down here." Not half so alone as we're going to be, thought Margaret gratefully, and counted the days until they were to sail for New Delhi. The calls continued: once a week, ten minutes; once a day, sometimes up to an hour at a time. Silje tried to hide that Joe was calling collect, but Margaret knew. Sometimes Margaret turned the kitchen faucets on full just to drown out Silje's happy voice.

And always Silje found her afterwards. "Joe says 'Hello', Margaret" or "Joe sends greetings" or "Joe asked how you are".

Margaret was fine. Only 28 days to go. The ship from New York would sail on the 22nd of September. On August 28 they would take their exam in Telagu, merely a formality of course. The Mission Board never counted scores - language could be learned by anyone but commitment and dedication showed you had the calling. And she and Silje had the call. Like Vangie Quam and Emma Eide, the most admired missionaries in the church. 'Silje Arneson and Margaret Jorgenson'. Margaret lets their names run together. Soon to be sailing. Soon to see India. Soon far from collect phone calls or flowers or daily mail.

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church would commission them on the first of September. Margaret could remember the commissioning service for Vangie and Emma: the gold mums and the organ trumpeting and the country parishes coming for cake and coffee served all afternoon on the church lawn. It had been a glorious day.

On the 30th of August Joe arrived in a borrowed Ford. He said he'd driven all night to make it to Chicago before they boarded the train for Marah. He would drive them home. They didn't need to go by train.

Margaret was horrified. Drive over-night with Joe? What was he thinking of? They are missionaries. The taxi's on its way. The pullman berths are booked.

No, Joe.

"I'll meet you at the station, Margaret," says Silje quietly.

So Margaret, who had never taken a taxi before, went alone through the dark streets of Chicago's south side, under the rumbling of the elevated trains carrying shadowed faces home from the city, past acres of concrete playgrounds, brick stoops, sooted windows, until she reached Lake Shore Drive and the shimmer of a lake whose distant shore could not be seen. Margaret relaxes then. In the city streets, in the congestion, there were so many people, so many hard and unrepentant faces. So much animosity and anger in those eyes.

In India she would see carts and cattle and children and sari-wrapped women and their eyes would be warm and dark and welcoming. Welcoming - that was the difference. These people had eyes that would not see, ears that would not hear. In India she and Silje would ride like a pair of princesses through the streets (would there even be streets?), loving the people they saw.

She couldn't get out of Chicago fast enough. At night you could hear the heavy pounding of saxophones from behind dark windows, could see women walking with sauntering steps, never in a hurry and always watching the cigarette-smoking men, strangers they must be, but watching each other as if they were going to meet and wanted to. The children dashed into city streets after balls and few of them wore socks, just rubber sneakers with fraying dirty shorts. There was such a stench of garbage. Unwrapped, it poured out from cans which looked as if they'd been kicked by countless children. The people sat outside on hot porch stoops, half a dozen crowded on a few small steps, cans of beer in their hands, faces sweaty, teeth too wide. Once she'd seen a woman sitting with her legs wide open, her skirt above her knees and her thick thighs bare. There was no restraint: everything was large and loud and full of laughter.

Margaret settled her blue straw hat against her head. She was not sorry to leave Chicago. They thought they had religion, these people. Well if that was religion she wanted no part in it. The music she had heard coming out of corner churches couldn't be songs of praise. Clapping and shouting, raucous rhythms that no God would ever listen to. And the people afterwards, pouring out of the church, laughing. They thought they had religion but what they had was pleasure: flushed faces, eager eyes. What kind of religion was that?

The lights along the Lake were a serpentine path taking her to the station where Silje and she would board the Pullman car, too luxurious for their calling perhaps but the Mission Board had insisted. She and Silje must be rested for the busy days ahead.

Would there be air-conditioning? In India they would have none. Vangie had written that in India air conditioning was a month in the hills. Margaret wouldn't escape to the hills. She planned to take the top bunk in the pullman, where it was hotter.

But Silje never made it to the station; Margaret didn't board the train that night.

Margaret sits in her father's chair, in the dark, the light from the kitchen falling partway into the sitting room. It's still her father's room, she realizes. It isn't hers at all. His chair, his reading glass, his teaching certificates on the wall, his afghan on the back of the settee. His notebooks on the desk: lines of upright script chronicling births and deaths of the entire Bergen clan. Only the facts. Not a word of feeling. She wrote letters for him to every living relative. "What are the christening date's of Jacob's children? Please confirm Laura's wedding date. Where did Sigurd get his second degree? What was the date of Hannah's death and the name of the baby who died with her?" He was demanding, harsh and ungrateful. And died without a moment's notice, the last notebook open beneath his hand.

When Margaret returned to the Mission Board house from the station it was midnight. They hadn't closed the door to the room she shared with Silje or pulled the drapes against the darkness of the night or the brightness of the moon. She saw them there, in Silje's bed, the two of them together, and all her life she wished she hadn't. The sight remained in memory and in pain, an indelible stain of India ink.

In the morning Silje, wearing Joe's white shirt, found Margaret sitting in the kitchen, her suitcase by her side, her hat still on. "We left a message for you, Margaret," Silje said quietly. "We asked them to page you, to tell you to take the train without me." Margaret didn't look at her. "I'm not going to India with you. I'm going to marry Joe." Margaret sat in the kitchen until she took the taxi to the train. Joe and Silje returned to Marah a week later. Margaret had been left to cancel the commissioning service herself.

The Mission Board had found her another more committed, more Christian companion a year later. But her father said he needed her, he couldn't complete his work unless she stayed to help him.

And then the war had cancelled all Mission Board assignments.

Why hadn't she told Silje that Harold was expected any moment, going to the hospital too? Well, what good was Joe's deluxe sedan if it couldn't get Silje to the hospital? Everyone knew Joe didn't have a penny to his name before he married Silje. And now he drove the most recent model as assuredly as if he had been riding in luxury all his life. How could they consider owning such a car? How could Silje live in a house with three lots for a lawn and own a summer home along the lake? The eye of the needle, didn't Silje remember that? And "Lay not up for yourselves treasure on earth" — didn't she know what that meant? Margaret had been wrong about Silje. How could she have been so wrong?

Silje asked Margaret to be her maid of honour in the spring, but Margaret declined. Silje ought to ask one of her sisters. But Silje said if Margaret refused she wouldn't have any attendant at all. She'd be married in a Sunday morning service and have the entire congregation be witness to their wedding vows. That's what she'd do. A wedding was to make a promise public, and what more public place was there than the sanctuary on a Sunday morning?

On the first Sunday in May Joe and Silje walked through the streets of Marah collecting daisies and lilies of the valley for her wedding bouquet. Friends and children and even perfect strangers joined them on their way to church. The carillon played for a full hour while they talked on the wide steps of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church. When the organ burst into "My Heart Ever Faithful" Joe and Silje walked hand in hand up the aisle, Silje without a veil or a long dress and her father behind her and not beside her where he ought to be.

"Hardly seems like a wedding at all," sniffed Dorothy Nordlie. But of course it was, a real wedding, and the largest and most joyful in the history of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church.

When Joe and Silje were called to say their vows at the end of the sermon and before the offertory, all their relatives, even Joe's great-grandmother in her wheelchair, came forward and joined hands in an unbroken circle surrounding Joe and Silje. Just as they turned to go, as the clan parted to let them through, two little girls rushed up with rings of white bridal wreath and both Joe and Silje bent to let themselves be crowned before they took the hands of the children and walked with them down the aisle. No one standing for the singing of "Now Thank We all our God" needed to look down at the words.

Of course it was a real wedding. And a real celebration: sandwiches and cake and coffee and all the ice cream the children could eat. Friends filled the church basement and lawn for hours. Joe and Silje even played "Last Couple Out" with the children who lined up to say 'please come play with us, just once'.

Margaret, who would have been maid of honour if only Silje had asked her twice, watched from the balcony and left early to check on her father after placing her unopened gift on the table heaped with packages. "A silver candle snuffer," Silje's aunt exclaimed when she opened it for the bridal couple. "What an unusual and elegant gift. Silje has such imaginative and thoughtful friends."

The picture Joe and Silje gave Margaret shows the two of them in profile, Silje bending down to receive a rose from a child, sun softening her face. Margaret filed it in the 'F' encyclopedia. Friends. Final. Finished. She doesn't want the memory hanging on her wall. But her sister Mary hangs there, with Harold in his wrinkled suit, in front of the same altar, married a month after Silje and Joe on a sweltering June afternoon. Margaret and Harold's brother stand on either side of the bridal couple. They are all smiling - joyful, dishonest smiles. Full of teeth and tension. Margaret knows. She can remember: the heat, the delay, Mary's hurt and bewildered eyes.

Just before the processional Margaret realized that the flowers hadn't come. Harold said he'd drive to a florist in Jamestown. Everyone said no. We don't need them. Don't bother. "I'd rather you didn't go," Mary pleaded. "I don't mind about the flowers. Please don't."

But Harold set off in a cloud of dust. Mary perspired in her satin gown, sitting on a metal chair in the stifling heat of the church basement. Finally Harold returned, triumphant, with his collar undone, his black suit covered with dust and his face streaming with sweat. "Had to change a tire," he panted. "Went flat just outside town." He carried a bouquet of carnations, dusty and limp. "Here, get them in there," he ordered Margaret. She refused. Guests were waiting impatiently in the pews. The flowers were filthy, Mary was in tears. And so Harold placed them himself in mason jars of water along the pulpit's edge and in the center of the altar.

"You asked for flowers for our wedding and now you have them," he said to Mary when he returned to the silent group waiting in the basement. He wiped his face on the tea towel covering the open-face sandwiches and replaced it carefully, drank from the punch bowl ladle as if it were a dipper at the pump and said, "Let's go." He arrived at the altar with his bow tie falling from one side of his dusty shirt, irritated at the prim resentment shown in every one of his future in-law's eyes, and in his future wife's as well.

Everything to excess, that was Harold. Nothing could ever be done decently and in order. Everything flamboyant and eccentric. How could he be a clergyman, a man of the cloth, a prophet of God? When Mary first wrote that a seminary student was calling for her at the nurse's residence in Minneapolis, Margaret had been delighted. No one was more suited to the life of the parish than her little sister. She encouraged the match, even though she hadn't met Harold. You couldn't go wrong with a servant of God. The weekend Harold proposed Mary called her. "I'm not sure," she had said. "I don't think this is God's will." She was crying over the phone.

"Of course it's God's will. How can it not be?" Margaret had said. "A minister of the church? And you say he's been called to Holy Spirit here in Marah? You pray about it, Mary."

Imagine her sister married to the new minister of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church! Svendsbye had been there forty years and Mary's young man was getting the first call Holy Spirit had sent out. Most young ministers had to start out in the country, in poor parishes with pump organs and wood stoves. Holy Spirit had the best pipe organ in the country. And the largest membership in the District. They even talked of hiring an assistant for the minister.

Margaret was sure this was the right thing and said so. Mary was just afraid of marriage. Weren't all young girls? Margaret wondered whether she would be. If he was a minister she wouldn't be.

How Harold had become pastor at Holy Spirit was a mystery. God works in mysterious ways, Margaret thought, maybe even devious ones. It was obvious why Joe had become director of music at Holy Spirit: he was simply the best musician in the synod. Who else deserved to play their pipe organ? Who else could? He was the youngest full professor Harmonia College had ever hired and he'd _volunteered_ to do the music at Holy Spirit. His compositions were sought after by churches all the way to California and some were even sung by secular choirs on the eastern seaboard. But Harold? How did he ever get to the largest, most prestigous parish in the Church?

Holy Spirit had wanted someone who could preach, who could keep them awake on Sunday mornings, who could appeal to the young people and not offend the old. "We want someone with energy and enthusiasm," they had said. "Someone who can really make us hear the Word of the Lord. Someone with youthful style. We've had enough sobriety with Svendsbye."

Well of course Harold could preach. He was a wizard with words, but when it was all over, what had he said? He never read from a text, not like old man Svendsbye who let his voice drone on and on. Harold's eyes roamed over the congregation and rested on each person for a split but telling second: the widowed women in their hats and buttoned-up cloth coats, the children squirming in the sun, the young men whose eyes above their clumsily-knotted ties were fastened on the young girls singing with such feeling and such softly swelling breasts.

Yes, Harold could preach. Words like "the righteous wrath of the Lord" rolled off his tongue with ease. He could work a repetition to the last syllable of effectiveness: Do you want to see Him when He comes? Do you want to see Him? Do you want to see? Do you want? and Do you? And then he would drop his head in silent prayer. And a pause. He could hold a pause until the shuffling ceased, until the papers were held still, until the coughing subsided. "The spirit is willing," he would look searchingly around the congregation "but the flesh...yes, the flesh I want to tell you...the flesh...is weak."

The people were entranced, satisfied. Almost all of them. But in two years it was over.

In May of their second year Mary announced her pregnancy, her dark hair falling in loose waves across her face, her role as minister's wife, although unrehearsed, well-acted and applauded. Mary beamed when they gave Harold a car on the anniversary of their first year. Wasn't this what working in the church was all about? Service and gratitude. If they really loved you, if you really served them, the congregation would take good care of you. Who knows, Mary had said, before the baby comes the congregation might even paint the parsonage. Or at least paint the baby's room. The peeling paint had to wait, however; the car was a necessity. Harold was good at visitations, he was excellent in fact. His ability to comfort and to pray for the sick - even over the phone he could pray - and his willingness to hold the hands of the dying was legendary - and he so young! A car was mandatory. How could he get around otherwise, and Holy Spirit growing bigger every day?

And then it was over.

It wasn't the rhetorical slickness that damned Harold. Everywhere in the church rhetoric for its own sake was admired, even emulated. No, the rhetoric could have made him. It was the other tricks he introduced. He got cocky, he got clever. No congregation would forgive a clergyman that. When Harold got going no one could stop him. Margaret should know. She had been Mary's confidante during that endless summer. The minister's wife had no one else to confide in. "I can't be friends with any of the women at the church," Mary had cried to her one night when Harold was at conference and she'd come to stay with Margaret. "I'm always the minister's wife, never 'Mary'. I'm only 'Mary' with you, Margaret. I'm even the minister's wife with Harold." Margaret had tucked her into the brass bed that night, had brought her cocoa and rubbed her back with oil. Had brushed her hair and listened. Mary should have married someone dignified like their father, a pillar of the church with principles and restraint, Margaret thought. The baby was due in six months; Mary shouldn't be so troubled now.

First Harold had stopped wearing the white surplice and the liturgical stoles in colours denoting the seasons of the church year. Then he refused to wear a clerical collar. He said he was no different from the rest of them and he certainly shouldn't wear white, suitable only for the Lord, not for one of His humble servants.

Then he started dressing up. On the third Sunday in June, Margaret could remember the day exactly, he wore track shoes and his old track suit. His text was from Hebrews that day. "Therefore," he began, looking at the entire congregation, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." He read from the pulpit and then he ran, yes ran, around the perimeter of the sanctuary, grinning at their discomfort and surprise. When he started the sermon he sat on the steps leading up to the altar, as if he were at a picnic discussing crop failure or harvesting. "Life is a race," he repeated, still slightly breathless, grinning. "And all of us are runners in it."

People began to talk. Of course they did. Some said he'd gone too far; others said wait and see. But everyone saw that the sanctuary was full the next Sunday. They weren't disappointed. "Fight the good fight of the faith," he began, taking his text from first Timothy. "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." That day he brought out boxing gloves, punched his fists in the air - and invited two little boys to come up and learn a few punches from him before he started his sermon.

No one left. Many wanted to. And he had the nerve to stand on the church steps afterwards with his boxing gloves, shaking hands, jovial, his head thrown back, in full view of the Episcopalian and Methodist churches on the other two corners of the intersection, churches where the ministers' dignity was secure and visible.

How long could it last?

Joe didn't lead the opposition, but he didn't oppose it either. He said he didn't want to observe trivialized dramatizations of the scriptures. He wanted to worship. Life, he was heard to say, and our theology he said, was more complicated than Harold made out. Theology was a risky word to use, but it belonged in the sanctuary. Everyone knew boxing gloves did not.

The last Sunday finished the series, finished Harold. He appeared in a soldier's uniform and read from II Timothy: "Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." And then he went through a military routine he could only have devised himself. It was militaristic, precise - and unmistakable parody. He was trying to amuse, to show how well he could act. Where did he get the soldier's uniform, accurate in every detail? Minds raced. From Alta Pederson, whose son had just been shipped home in a box? From Ernie Bjornson whose son had just finished his tour? Both of them would have given Harold the uniform without asking any questions. Harold marched back and forth in front of the altar as if he were changing the guard at Buckingham Palace. The church was as quiet as a graveyard until a sob came from the center of the sanctuary: Birgitte Opheim had received a 'missing in action' telegram the last week. Immediately from the balcony came the first chords of the hymn "For all the saints who from their labours rest." Joe played so slowly some didn't recognize the hymn. At the end of the first verse he motioned the choir to sing. From the choirloft at the front of the sanctuary Silje motioned the congregation to join on the second stanza. Slowly, like a drum beat, the hymn was sung. When finished, Joe continued with the order of service as if the sermon had been concluded: offertory, sanctus, closing hymn. Harold, looking sheepish, sat in his chair by the altar for the first verse, then disappeared behind the altar and didn't return. Joe led them through the worship like a shepherd guiding the sheep. And stood at the end of the last hymn to say he was calling a meeting of the congregation for that very night.

Harold had misused a symbol, had made a travesty of the honour of the country, the war, the boys who were fighting. He had treated the uniform as a prop. Some people wondered why a pastor didn't have to fight. Come to think of it, why hadn't Harold been drafted? Why should he be home, strutting across the front of the church, pretending to be a soldier, leaving others to fight for him? People remembered the song he had announced before the sermon that morning, "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war." Only 'as to' war, not really to war. Harold only pretended. He had undermined something sacred. As if he had used a cross for a walking stick. There was anger and hurt in the congregation, and enormous dismay.

Margaret looks at the reproduction of the sanctuary which hangs above the sofa, the Christmas card print which she framed for Father's last Christmas. In the print the pews are empty, the choir loft silent, the organ shut, the poinsettas brilliant around the base of the altar. There was peace in the sanctuary, like there was meant to be. Harold had asked for all that trouble. He couldn't be a servant, he had to be a clown, a showman, a maverick. He should have been an auctioneer or salesman or announcer on a radio show. A clergyman! Harold was as out of place in the pulpit as Billy the Kid.

No one was ever sure whether Joe said it or whether someone said it for him, but Joe, the rumour went, would resign as music director unless Harold left. Lose Joe? Joe was worth a dozen Harolds, wasn't he? Losing Joe would be unthinkable. The choir had never been so large in the history of the church. Harold could be replaced. Anyone could preach. But no one could replace Joe. His fingers danced over the organ keys when he played and his choir robe, when he strode up the aisle, flowed out behind his 6'4" frame as if it were a sorcerer's cape.

It was all over by September. Swiftly. Everyone wanted it settled by rally day. No one wanted a minister who used the pulpit for a stage, who performed instead of preached, who provided spectacle in place of worship.

On a hot August night the congregation voted, not by ballot, not by a show of hands, but by standing one by one. A standing ovation, Margaret thought grimly to herself, sitting in a far corner of the balcony before she left to hold Mary in her arms.

Harold and Mary left for the farm the very next week. They had been there five years, helping his brother farm, waiting for people to forget, waiting for a call to a new parish. People wouldn't forget. Getting a call would be impossible, Margaret knew. Harold was done for. Pity her poor sister.

At the window this time, shivering, Margaret sees what she is looking for: the wobbly brilliance of the snow plow's beam, moving so slowly its motion is almost imperceptible across the darkness of the winter night. And behind it - a star of light.

She should call Silje. The snow plow is coming, she should say, and Harold's car is following behind. There will be room for you when the little girls get out. Mary is going to the hospital too, you can ride together. But she doesn't. Margaret's hand closes around the spine of the heavy receiver, tightens, falls away. If only Harold had some dignity, some sense, some measure of maturity. Then Harold would help Silje slide into the car, thank Margaret for meeting them, kiss his little girls goodbye - and speed on his way.

But Harold would not, could not. She knew. If he sensed a receiving line, an audience, and if he had accomplished the impossible: with one hand pulled the Plymouth out of a ditch, or driven all the way on an empty tank of gas, or skimmed across the fields above the surface of the snow, or pedalled the car like a small toy scooter, or delivered a bouncing baby in safety and in health — how insistent he would be to tell the story, to make clear the miracles he had wrought, to elicit awe and admiration.

At the top of the stairs Margaret hesitates. The snow on the steps is deep. She takes the broom and brushes the wide steps, her arms moving back and forth, until she reaches the bottom, where she sweeps once again, back and forth. Dropping the broom she hurries up the steps, through the door - even lets it bang - and swiftly up the narrow staircase to her door. She fumbles for the key and without removing her boots rushes to the phone. But there is no answer now.

She is almost to Seventh Street before she sees them walking hand in hand, Joe hatless and Silje in her long fur coat. Under the lamplight at the corner Joe stops, tucks his gloves under his armpits, and takes Silje's head in his hands. They cast a single shadow on the snow. Margaret looks away. When she looks again Joe is brushing off the tobaggon. She sees him drop on one knee before Silje and for a brief moment press his face against her body. On his feet again, doesn't he stop and kiss her *again*, his arms trying to go all the way round her and can't. Margaret, not daring to move, wonders does she have to see them at all. Before Joe releases Silje he reaches up and pulls the branch above him. A bushel of snow falls over them both. Silje's coat is snowman-white and her eyes blink back the flakes and she is laughing and throwing handfuls of snow at Joe. Margaret watches, as stiff as the icicles hanging from the branch sheltering her solitary shadow. The only noise in the night: Silje and Joe laughing on the edge of Seventh Street's wide stretch of snow.

Silje's arms are windmilling, her hands pushing back her hair. Suddenly motionless, she sees Margaret, her face frozen in a laugh, melting to an unanswered question: "Margaret?" Across the highway, "Margaret?", and then, drawing in her arms, eyes closed, she bends with a sudden fountain of pain.

"Harold's car is coming behind the plow, Joe," Margaret calls unwillingly. "Mary's going to hospital too tonight, or trying to. Silje can ride with her. I think." Her words are silenced by the plow passing between the three of them.

"I'm not going to stop," shouts Harold as he sees Margaret, his head sticking out the window, watching for her. "I'm nearly out of gas. Just help the girls get out. Get closer to the car, Margaret, closer! Run along beside us, help them out the window, I'm not going to stop, what if I run out of gas, then what would your sister do, how would we get to the hospital? Margaret! Can't you help?"

Naomi's frightened face and shoulders are pushing through the back window. "Don't worry, Naomi. Don't be so frightened. Just do as I say." He's steering with one hand, pulling Naomi's coat through the window with his other. "Margaret, help her! Can't you help the poor child!" He leans forward to jostle the gas pedal which is stuck and revving up the engine.

"That's better," he calls, as he senses a figure running alongside the car. "That's more like it. I knew you could do it, Margaret." But it's not Margaret moving beside him. It's

Joe who reaches in the window and grabs the keys: silencing and stopping Harold. Harold shakes his head in anger.

"You're terrifying your children, Harold. You must stop the car." Joe lifts both girls out and stands them carefully against their Aunt Margaret. "I need you to take Silje, Harold. She needs to get to the hospital too. Will you do that?" And after a pause. "Will you take me too?" Harold stares straight ahead, his face a hard line. "There's only room for her," he says sullenly. "Of course, who knows whether I can get this started again."

"Try."

Joe has already opened the back door and is rolling up the window. "Mary, so good to see you. You're looking as lovely as usual." He gives Silje a wordless goodbye. "I'll be there as soon as you are," he promises.

The black Plymouth, moving as stately as a hearse, continues the journey. Harold has no trouble starting the car. He doesn't wave goodbye.

In the back seat, squeezed together, Silje and Mary hold each other's hands: Mary's fingers warm and moist; Silje's cold and damp with snow. Not a word, in silence, at one in pain and memory. Harold, jovial once again, turns his head to talk to Silje. He doesn't need to watch the road when he is going this slowly. He sits adjacent to a heap of boxes, some untied, their contents spilling out: papers, bulletins, tapes, letters and books. The shelves of his study - thrown into the front seat. On the visor a card reads: "All things work together for good to them that love the Lord."

In his rear view mirror are the faces of two women, both with child, dependent on this man and on the steel arms of the plow. Does he see the face of his wife, kneaded in pain and discontent and hope, worry making her gentle face hard and weary? He does not. When he looks in the mirror, he sees only himself.

Outside the children wave wave at their mother whose shadow quickly fades from view. Margaret stands on the street, backed by the height of the snow bank, a child's hand in each of hers. Joe is directly across from her, watching the black Plymouth until it is out of sight.

And then they are facing each other across the highway: Margaret with Rebecca and Naomi, Joe alone. Margaret could nod her head to him, could call a greeting, could speak. She is silent. To return home she and the little girls will have to climb the snowbank. She will not begin until Joe goes. Let him move first. He promised he would meet Silje at the hospital. He should hurry.

Go.

The children's breath makes little puffs in front of their pink faces, not thick enough, however, to hide their pleasure in this strange and wonderful night. They are speechless: one moment asleep against their mother, the next standing in the snow - chilled, but astonished, delighted.

The children gaze up at Aunt Margaret, expectant, waiting for her lead. You mustn't make a move with Aunt Margaret unless she lets you know she's ready. How many times has she reprimanded them? But they go willingly with her because they remember half glasses of 7-up served to them in her kitchen, they remember sleeping in the brass bed with all the smiling aunts and uncles watching from the wall, they remember the oak rocking chair which is big enough for both of them, the faded pictures on the lampshade showing Dickens' England. But best of all they remember that Grandpa will not be there to pierce them with his eyes or frighten them with his prayers before they eat or go to bed. And they are glad for that. They go with Aunt Margaret willingly: in the car their mother was silent, remote, and, could it be, afraid?

Margaret waits. Surely Joe will waste no time in setting off to town, to the bridge, to the brick hospital where tonight two babies will be born. Joe has a mile to walk. He should start.

But Joe crosses slowly to their side of the street and without glancing at Margaret drops on one knee before the children. "You are Rebecca," he says. "You are Naomi." His eyes move from one to another, like magnets. Their eyes are wide at the sight of this man so easily made into someone their own size. "And will you be strong and tall like your good Aunt Margaret?" he asks. Margaret stiffens. Does he think he can warm her this way? Does he think they won't know he is mocking her? He takes a hand of each of the children. "And are you children of the Heavenly Father?" he asks. And then begins to sing. Oh, shudders Margaret, can't he ever do anything without music? Why now? Why 'nestling bird nor star in heaven, such a refuge ere was given'? The children join in, their little voices singing their favorite bedtime melody, smiling at the frost clouds forming in front of their faces while they sing with this funny man who kneels in front of them as if they were a pair of princesses.

Margaret turns to go, but her back is against the bank, Joe is kneeling in front of them, and the children will not move, even for her insistent hand, until Joe lets them go.

"What kind of a baby are you going to have?" he asks Naomi.

What kind of a question is that to ask children? Joe doesn't have any idea how to talk to little ones.

"A big one," Naomi answers first. "My mommy says we're going to have a big baby."

"A boy," Rebecca adds. "My daddy says we'll have a boy."

"Then we'll have a big boy too," smiles Joe. "What do you think of that?"

They think it's absolutely wonderful. What a good idea. Two big boys born tonight.

Joe glances at the snowbank.

"Watch this," he says, and scoops a handful of snow into his grey and white knitted mitts. But the snow is too dry for snowballs. "Angels," he says. "Let's make angels for these babies. Come quickly, help me." He lifts each girl up so swiftly both of them fly to the top of the bank. Taking their hands, he runs down the other side and onto the Knudtson's smooth lawn.

"Like this. Watch me."

Margaret, who does not want to, climbs up the bank. It would not do to let Mary's children out of her sight.

The children are moving like windmills, laughing. They climb carefully out of their angels. Where should they put their feet? How can they get up without bending the wings? Tearing the robe? Scratching the face? Their braids are wrapped in snow and their woollen leggings are white. They are shaking their heads, dancing up and down.

Joe faces Margaret. She cannot escape his eyes. "Unto us..." he says very slowly, willing her to remember the rest. "...a Child, the Prince of Peace. When are you ever going to forget, Margaret. When forgive?"

She is frightened by his tone, the anger in his eyes. Silje made her choice; she has made hers. Why is Joe blaming her for this silence, this gulf? She didn't call Silje tonight because of that. She was protecting Mary from delay. Protecting all of them from Harold. Doesn't Joe know that little incident so many years ago had nothing to do with tonight? What can she say? The children are so close. That isn't it, she wants to say. You're wrong. You really are, Joe Abrams.

She wants to speak, to explain, but Joe is already turning towards the hospital. "Take good care of your baby brother," he calls to Rebecca and Naomi.

"Big baby brother," Rebecca calls back.

"And take good care of our Aunt Margaret," he adds, rushing down the bank, joining the end of the procession: the plow, the Plymouth, a tall lean man.

Margaret, her hands occupied by a niece on either side, cannot wipe her eyes. She walks brusquely along the path to her home, and sends the children upstairs to remove their snowsuits on the landing while she sweeps a dozen needless times the smooth and slippery stairs.

SUCH A REFUGE

Later, they argued about it. Anne said they met at the singing of the _Una Sancta_; Elizabeth said it was in Marah, down at the river. Didn't Anne remember the river? And the man. Elizabeth shivers to remember. Silent, shuffling constantly from one foot to another, in slow motion, trying to speak, his head nodding up and down. Hovering over them. Over six foot tall and with a beard that had never been cut. A heavy overcoat on the hottest day of summer - black and double-breasted and all buttoned up. Long underwear, once white, tucked into black shoes with the laces undone. Around his neck a white stiff collar, loose, shifting from side to side. His hands rose and fell like waves at the shore. Silently. Moving around them like he was drawing a circle. Watching them dig.

All of it Elizabeth can see in an instant. And remember the parched bare day. It should have been lush and green by the river. The drought that summer was the worst on record - destroying green; strangling dreams; withering roots; suffocating the soil.

When Mark threw the bird into the water, the man's body shook and he raised his legs like he was pawing the ground. He tapped their elbows and reached for their hands. Trying to invite them, invite them for what? He was large and heavy but so light on his feet he could have been the tin man looking for his heart - or his voice. He never stopped smiling, not once, and when they raced up the bank he tossed his head as if he thought he was waving his hand.

Elizabeth can see it all, but Anne says there wasn't any man there, not the day they buried the bird. They were alone. Elizabeth must be thinking of Pastor Johnson. He often walked down by the river until they put him away. He'd had a stroke and preached to the trees or lectured the river, never making a sound, smiling with exquisite, speechless grace. Conducting hymns with his hands. Nodding the rhythms of rubrics and responses.

"I think he wanted to dance with us," Elizabeth said. "What else can you do when you can't talk? We shouldn't have been so frightened."

"I wasn't frightened," says Anne.

"Of course you weren't. You say you weren't even there."

"But I was when we buried the bird. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. My Aunt has never let me forget. That's when we met, when we buried the bird."

"No, we met at the Una Sancta. The bird was later that summer."

"It was just before. We came to my Aunt's in June and didn't go home until school started in September. I was sick most of the time, and so was my mother, I think. Why else would we have stayed with Aunt Margaret so long?"

"I never saw you again that summer. Your Aunt wouldn't let you play with me."

"I can't think why."

"Our parents were friends."

"Had been friends."

"Might have been."

"Should have been."

They've all gone to church.

Outside Aunt Margaret's house, Elizabeth sits in a lawn chair, covered with a threadbare quilt, trying to get warm. She has been sick for eight days, has shivered while everyone else sweats in the heat. While her mother and aunt wear print sundresses with straps across their backs, baring the flesh of their underarms, Elizabeth wears flannel nighties and wool socks. When her aunt closes the blinds in the living room as early as ten in the morning to keep the small room cool, Elizabeth asks to have the curtains in her bedroom left open and waits for the sun to soak her in its warmth.

Elizabeth has promised to memorize five Bible verses if she can just sit outside. "What will people think?" Aunt Margaret had asked. "Sitting outside during church, sunning yourself?"

"But who would see her?" Elizabeth's mother had answered. "She'll be sitting behind the rows of corn. No one can see her from the street."

Elizabeth is alone. No one in this neighborhood mows the lawn this morning, no one turns the radio on, no one is out polishing or even washing a car. This is Sunday. Branches hang motionless, heavy with leaves; wide shaded porches are empty. Two cats sleep in tandem on green steps. Even their tails lift in unison to slice the heavy air.

Elizabeth has brought a book to read. Surely if she gets her Bible verses done it will be all right to read? She has almost finished Strawberry Girl. The people in Lois Lenski's pictures are always together: children in sun hats, a family hoeing, or adults riding in a buggy with a child or two tucked in. Elizabeth wishes she was with her sisters on the farm, collecting eggs with Aunt Myrtle or riding the tractor with Uncle Oscar. She would have been there, if she hadn't gotten sick.

Aunt Margaret's house is on the corner, a block from where the highway cuts through the center of town. Elizabeth has been forbidden to cross the highway. Every summer she says, "Surely I am old enough to cross the highway," but every summer permission is refused. "As long as you're visiting me, you stay on this side of the highway," Aunt Margaret says. "You can walk as far as the river if you like, not down to it, just to where the pavement ends. But you can't cross the highway."

Elizabeth leans back in the chair, trying to remember the words. "But a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another." She's got it right, she's sure of it, but is it John or Mark who said those words?

Elizabeth's mother and her Aunt Margaret are at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, the largest building in the town, the largest congregation in the district — eight services on Easter Sunday when everyone comes. Elizabeth has never been at Holy Spirit for Easter, however. They are home then, eight hundred miles away in Illinois where her father's congregation doubles too and he conducts twice the normal number of services at Faith Lutheran and his parishioners have a choice of two. Every Easter her Aunt calls: "We had five services this year (...six...seven...eight). Easter will soon be a two-day holiday if Holy Spirit keeps growing so fast." Her Aunt laughs that sharp short bark. "Did _you_ have many out?"

Once Aunt Margaret came to visit at Easter. She skipped all the events and her responsibilities at Holy Spirit: the singing of "The Seven Last Words" and the Easter Sunrise service at the cemetery and the youth breakfast and the supervision of altar lilies. She came because Elizabeth's mother lost the baby. 'Lost the baby' they said in whispers, as if it could or would be found. That was the year the Fox River flooded and the year the storm froze all the trees into brittle glistening figures of ice on Easter Sunday morning. Aunt Margaret never smiled once, or at least Elizabeth never saw her smile. She looked down her long nose at everyone and rarely left the kitchen except to say, "Do we really need all that noise?" when Elizabeth was skipping rope in front of the hall mirror.

Aunt Margaret was angry, you could tell. She flung pans about in the kitchen and pushed the vacuum cleaner so fast she often banged the cannister into the settee or the clawfoot legs of the lamp table. "Tell her she doesn't have to vacuum" Elizabeth's mother would say softly from the hall bedroom to Elizabeth. "Go on, tell her please, tell her it doesn't matter. Tell her I wish she wouldn't." Elizabeth would go and shout to Aunt Margaret, "It doesn't matter, Aunt Margaret, Mother says it doesn't matter." But her Aunt would glare at her, point to the vacuum, and shout, "I can't hear you, Elizabeth. Someone's got to do it. Can't you see I'm busy? Run along and play." And she would say more but Elizabeth always ran back to her mother's bedroom where she sat and read by the window while her mother lay with closed eyes but never was asleep. Once her mother begged, "Tell her please to stop." Elizabeth marched out and pulled the plug before she told her Aunt to stop, but that day she came back crying and her mother never asked her to carry messages to Aunt Margaret again.

Rebecca and Naomi were at school all day. They didn't realize how mad Aunt Margaret was. "It's all so unnecessary," Aunt Margaret would mutter from the kitchen and sometimes say to Elizabeth when she was sent to dry the silverware. "This shouldn't have happened. What was your mother doing up on a ladder? What kind of a church makes the minister's wife paint the parsonage? Why didn't your father object?" But Elizabeth was gone, back to her mother's room or out to sit in the swing on the boulevard and watch for her sisters to come home from school.

Through half closed eyes Elizabeth sees the corn leaves fluttering in the wind, painted yellow by sun, dried crisp by the heat. On the sidewalk she sees a girl walking stealthily past, her body streaked by the stalks of corn. She is wearing leather sandals with closed toes and one of the soles is flapping loose with every step she takes. "Sensible shoes," Aunt Margaret would call them. "Sensible and expensive," Elizabeth's mother would add, knowingly. Dressing children was one of the few things Elizabeth's mother knew more about than Aunt Margaret.

The girl stops on the other side of the corn stalks. Her head is bent slightly forward, but Elizabeth can see that she is tall and her plaid dress is much too short. In her hands is a pair of sticks, stripped bare and bent. The girl is staring intently at the tips. Suddenly she turns and plunges into the rows of corn. Elizabeth moves her arms closer to her body, pulls the cotton quilt tighter. The girl is coming straight towards her chair! Elizabeth puts her hands over her eyes and squints through the slits in her fingers as the girl towers above her. "You're right over it. I bet you're sitting right on it. Could you move?"

The girl's voice is low and deliberate, as controlled as an adult's. "Move."

Elizabeth pushes with her elbows in order to shove herself out of the canvas sling and falls back, dizzy. "I'm sick," she says. "I can't get up."

"Can't? You're never to say 'can't' my mother says. It's one of the worst four-letter words. Put your mind to it. I'll picture you getting up, that should help. Are you getting up? Hurry!"

Elizabeth pulls herself up with both hands and slips to the grass. The girl opens her eyes. "I knew you could do it," she says approvingly and sticks out her foot to move the chair aside. It collapses to the ground.

The girl moves ahead one step. "Dammit," she whispers and Elizabeth's eyes open wide. "They were moving closer for a moment and now they're apart again."

Elizabeth wraps her arms around her knees. The girl bites her lip and looks down at Elizabeth. "Who are you anyway? I thought I knew all the kids in this neighborhood."

It's the voice. Elizabeth has never met someone her own age with a voice as commanding as her Aunt's, but this voice is also kind. Elizabeth looks closely at the girl. Her hem is coming down, rubbing against a dark scab on her knee. An inch below the gathered waist a patent belt is buckled tightly. One of the patch pockets is torn and the other is bulging out like a small breast. The girl's fingers clutch the sticks she holds in her hands so tightly that her knuckles are turning white. Her braids are coming loose and strings of hair fall along her shoulder.

"Your braids are coming out."

"So? What does it matter?"

The girl is standing on the collapsed lawn chair. "Please move," says Elizabeth. "I'm sick. I'm not supposed to be up."

"Do you always do what your're supposed to?"

"No. Yes. Don't you?"

"Of course not. But then I'm lucky, there aren't many things I'm not supposed to do. My mother thinks we should rely on Common Sense."

"Why aren't you in church?"

The girl is turning in a circle. The sticks point out like a pair of guns. "It's my Sunday off. Only six of us have to go at once. So why aren't _you_ in church?" She looks at Elizabeth. "Oh, I forgot, you're sick." She looks more closely. "Sometimes I get sick on Sundays too. Why don't you come and help us bury our bird? That would make you feel better. We're looking for water. I thought we'd bury him here but there isn't any water after all."

"But you can't bury your bird here. This is my Aunt's garden."

"You're wrong!"

"It _is_. It's my Aunt's. I should know."

"My mother's, you mean."

Elizabeth looks over her shoulder to be sure the white house is still there. "My Aunt Margaret lives here. This is _her_ garden."

"What's your name anyway?" the girl asks suddenly. "I knew it. You're Elizabeth, aren't you? I've been wanting to meet you since I first heard about you. Maybe that's why the sticks drew me here!"

Elizabeth's eyes open wide. "How do you know my name?"

The girl drops down on her knees. "And if you _are_ Elizabeth, we're going to be friends. In fact, we're friends already. Don't you know who I am?" She stops, expectant, waiting for Elizabeth to speak, hoping she will know. When Elizabeth shakes her head, the girl rushes ahead. "Your father drove both our mothers to the hospital in the middle of a blizzard the night we were to be born. And my father carried their suitcases in while your father parked the car. The nurses laughed to see one man bringing in two women 'great with child' - don't you like that, like Mary, with child - with *us*. And you were born first, so fast your father wasn't even there, and the doctor came out and told *my* father he had a girl. And he did too when I was born a minute later and all the time our mothers were together. Hasn't anyone ever told you?"

Someone has certainly told this girl, over and over again. She rushes through the story like it's a well-rehearsed hymn, full of familiar cadence and rhythm.

"My name is Anne, Anna Marie." She's disappointed Elizabeth doesn't know. "Why hasn't anyone told you about us? I live just across the highway, on Pillar Avenue too. That's my brother Mark, pulling the wagon. He went back for the shovel. Come with us, won't you? We'll have to bury Hans at the river. Oh come, we're friends, don't you see, we always *will* be friends, we always *have* been." Anne is on her feet, smoothing down her skirt, waving to Mark.

"But I don't know if I should..."

"Right then. Don't. Don't come."

Elizabeth reassembles the lawn chair. She sits on the edge, then slides back into the hammock seat. Mark is hurrying towards them singing, "A mighty fort, a mighty fort...", stomping his shovel tip into the sidewalk with every step and note.

"I hate you, I hate you, Annie," he says, as he stops in front of her.

"Now Mark," Anne begins. "Hans couldn't live forever."

"But you forgot to give him water. I hate you!"

"Let's get going," Anne interrupts impatiently. "We have to be back before they get home from church." She looks at Elizabeth. "Coming? Or not?"

"I was told never to go down to the river," says Elizabeth slowly.

"So was I," says Anne, carefully. "But were you ever forbidden to go down to the river with me?"

"Of course not. I don't even know you."

"Then you can go with me, don't you see?"

Anne has already started walking and has taken Mark's other hand. Elizabeth can hear her telling him what they're going to do. Elizabeth begins to follow behind, watching the red wagon bounce unevenly along the sidewalk. Anne's braids are really very messy. Snarled and loose. They probably weren't even braided this morning. Imagine not having your braids done every day. Elizabeth's braids are done right after breakfast. Her mother makes a part so straight down the center of Elizabeth's scalp that it looks as if it was drawn with a ruler. Then her mother wets the hair and divides the strands evenly and pulls the braid so tightly Elizabeth sometimes thinks her eyes are going to pop. She wraps a rubber band around the ends so many times Elizabeth often has to use scissors to cut it off the next morning. Anne's braids look as if they had been tied with ribbon, they are so loose and irregular.

Mark stops abruptly. "Is Hans _really_ dead, Annie?" He's looking up at Anne, his mouth an angry line.

"Really dead, Mark." Patient.

"I want to see him dead. Show me. Maybe you're wrong." Defiant. Hopeful.

"Right, I'll show you then." She pulls the tissue package from her pocket and begins to unwrap layer after layer of white toilet paper. The three of them squat down on the hot sidewalk, shadowed by trees along the boulevard. They watch in silence as the layers fall away. Anne pauses before removing the last layer. Only the tissue paper is soft. The bird is rigid and its claws stick out like branches. The feathers are pasted together, the beak is open, the eyes dull. The three of them eye Hans in silence, lying on Anne's open palm, faded yellow feathers on crumpled white paper. "That isn't Hans," Mark says in a whisper.

"Hans dead," Anne says as quietly.

Mark's mouth squeezes up. "Don't wrap him up again. He'll suffocate. And _I_ want to pull him in the wagon. Why do you get to carry him all the way, Annie?"

The procession begins once again. Sweat is forming on their faces and the backs of their legs. Elizabeth's waistband is sticking to her skin. It is so hot and there is nothing to drink.

"We have to decide what to say," says Anne, dropping behind Mark and the bright red wagon. "You have to say things at funerals."

Elizabeth knows what to say. She's been to dozens of funerals before she ever went to school, sitting in the back row while her mother played the organ and her father preached. They didn't want her left alone at home. She didn't mind the perfumed air or the crying or the somber sober faces. "What about 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help'?"

"It's a bit stupid to pray for help from hills, especially when there aren't any around here."

"Underneath are the everlasting arms?"

"Arms for a canary? What we need for Hans is wings."

Should she try again? Elizabeth isn't sure she wants to. "'The Lord is my Shepherd'?"

"This is a bird. 'Shepherd' isn't any good." Anne is ahead of Elizabeth, her head down. Why should Elizabeth care what they say. It's not her canary and her head feels dizzy. But she tries once more, "'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord'?"

"That's not too bad." Anne stops and looks at her. "If we leave out 'who die in the Lord'. I don't know what it means." She peers at Elizabeth. "Do you?"

Elizabeth thinks she does. But she's not going to explain now. Talking to this girl is like throwing a ball that kept coming back. Her head was aching. But she blurts out, "And you should sing 'Children of the heavenly father'. That has 'nestling bird nor star in heaven such a refuge ere was given'."

"Do you think that's 'here was given' or 'air was given'?"

"Oh I don't know and I don't care."

"We'll use it, it's good," Anne says quickly. "It doesn't matter for Hans. But words do matter. They can't mean just anything. That's what my father says anyway." She links her arm through Elizabeth's. "And we'll end with 'From dust thou heart return'." Anne's voice is so low Elizabeth can barely hear her words.

Why does this girl have to consider everything so carefully? Any one of these words would do, Elizabeth knows. Her father used them all the time and it never mattered what they meant then.

At the end of the avenue a low guard rail marks the bank of the river. Tall grass, brown and withered, covers the slope leading down to the river bed. Paths snake along the bank, dry dusty lines leading to the gravel edge.

Anne lifts up her arms, a stick in each hand. She stares at the points. "Quiet," she commands. "Don't talk!"

It's her left hand that moves first, slowly, like a closing door, moving until it lies against her right. "Did you see that, Elizabeth?" she whispers. "It worked! I can do it!"

Yes, Elizabeth saw. Anybody could move two sticks together. Who did Anne think she was? Moses parting the Red Sea?

"You try it, Elizabeth. If you can do it, then we'll know we're friends."

But Elizabeth shakes her head. She sits down on the curb and wonders why she came.

Anne considers Elizabeth's refusal in silence and turns to the river. "Come on then," she says. "We haven't much time."

Anne stops by one of the first trees. "You go play, Mark. Laying out the corpse is women's work."

"But I'm not supposed to be at the river alone, Annie."

"Well, it's hardly a river anymore, is it? Just a creek now. You can play at that small water hole over there."

"But I'm not supposed..."

"Mark, sometimes you have to be brave. This is one of those times. Now go."

Mark stomps off. It's dry along the bank and the river is muddy, shallow and slow-moving - lower than they've ever seen it.

Church bells tumble from the quiet center of the town as Anne begins digging. "Don't worry, those are the Methodist bells. They get out half an hour before we do, we've still got time. In our house we can do anything we like during church as long as we're ready to serve when the others get home."

"Serve?"

"The two who stay at home have to serve Sunday dinner." Elizabeth makes a face. "You don't understand. I love Sundays, even doing the Sunday jobs." She stops digging. "After dinner we sit on our back porch and talk. Just our family. My father always reads to us and my mother plays the flute. And on Sunday you have to ask a question. It doesn't matter what it is, you just have to ask something."

Anne is looking at Elizabeth, blue eyes staring steadily into blue. "What do _you_ do on Sunday?" Elizabeth doesn't answer. Her father preaches all morning and sleeps all afternoon. Questions are not asked on Sunday - or any other day. Her father rustles his paper and lifts it a little bit higher if she asks him a question, or her mother bustles off to the kitchen, or the two of them argue about the answer the other one has given. Once, after folk dancing at school started, she had asked what the Norwegian dances were and why she'd never seen any. Her father started with one explanation and her mother with another and then they both asked about this dancing at school, did she have a boy for a partner and were they learning to waltz as well, and if they did she'd have to sit on the side. And neither one ever answered her question. It was hardly worth asking.

"What sort of questions?"

Anne stops digging. "Well, once I asked why the river was called Red. 'Why is the Red River red?' But that's not clear. 'What is the beginning of the Red River?' That's not clear either. 'Where does the Red come from?' You can see the problem. The more you ask the question the more confused you get. But my father says that making the question clear is the only thing that matters."

"Why _is_ it red?"

"The river?"

"Yes, of course." That's what they were talking about, wasn't it? Was it the sickness that made her head ache, or was it this girl's endless careful words?

"But it's not red."

"I mean why is it called red?"

"I don't know. Neither does my father. We just made up the answers."

"Like what?"

"Well I think it was once red from blood: buffalo blood, Indian blood and..." Anne lowers her voice, "maybe even women's blood." Elizabeth looks her straight in the eye. They are sitting opposite each other - the shovel, the bird, the hole marking the space between them. Neither of them will say another word about that. "That's what I thought anyway. My father said he liked to think the red came from the willow trees. Have you seen them in the spring?"

Elizabeth has not. But she's thinking of an idea herself. "I've seen red ore near Duluth. Maybe it once colored the river red."

"Is Duluth near the Red River?" Anne asks very severely. "Are they even close to each other?"

Elizabeth is sorry she spoke. "I don't know."

"Of course that wouldn't matter," Anne says quickly. "Rivers run underground, you could be right."

"Or maybe from the sunset," Elizabeth continues. "You know, sun on the water making it red." She's getting the idea.

"Perhaps." Anne is no longer listening.

"Somebody knows, don't they? Somebody has to know. I hate not knowing things for sure." Elizabeth is pleading.

Anne doesn't answer. Her hair is falling across her face, her head is down and she is stabbing at the hole with the sand shovel as if she were pounding a nail.

"Maybe in the history books, maybe one of the pioneers knows, maybe..."

"Oh shut up, won't you? Can't you see this isn't working? I can't dig a hole deep enough with this shovel. What will we do?" She looks at Elizabeth's face and quickly adds, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean 'shut up', but I hate Hans being dead. I hate it so much I feel like screaming, like hitting someone." Anne throws down the shovel and stands, wiping her hands on her skirt, staring at the river. "When my grandma died I wanted to run as fast as I could, barefoot, across the fields to the edge and fall off. I wanted to run so fast I would forget she was dead. I wanted, I wanted..."

"I don't mind if you cry," says Elizabeth, reaching out a hand.

"It's true, you know. I did kill him, I forgot to give him any water for the last five days and now he's dead." Anne's hands are wiping dirty streaks across her cheeks. "I'd rather throw him in the garbage can. I hate him for dying. Hate him, hate him, hate him! They say Christ 'conquered' death. Then why do things still die?"

Elizabeth is trying to think. "Let's bury him in the river, Anne. They do that if you die at sea. We'll float him down the river."

"Up river, Elizabeth. The Red River flows up. It's the only one in the world that does."

When they reach the muddy river's edge Mark joins them and Elizabeth begins, "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

"We say 'Holy Spirit'."

"Hush, Mark. It doesn't matter."

"Into thy hands I commend Hans' spirit..."

"I think you should say body."

Elizabeth glares at Anne. Why can't they both shut up? No one interrupts her father when he says these words.

"Now we'll sing." Elizabeth and Anne begin "Children of the Heavenly Father" but Mark drowns them out with "Jeg er saa glad". Anne raises her eyebrows in disgust. "It's all right," whispers Elizabeth, singing the soft Norwegian syllables with Mark. "He doesn't know. It won't matter."

"I'm throwing him in," shouts Mark, and grabs the tissue-wrapped bundle from Anne's hands. He throws it far out into the water and it slowly slides away from them as Elizabeth begins "The Lord watch between me and thee...." but Anne tugs her arm. "We have to go, it's late."

"The sticks," says Elizabeth. "Make a cross, mark the spot."

"No," says Anne. "Take them with us. You have to practice with them, Elizabeth. At least you have to _try_."

They catch up to Mark and try to hurry him. But he is tired now. "Get in the wagon," Anne says, taking the handle from him. "We'll pull you."

"I forgot my sandals down at the river, Annie," Mark whispers. But Anne doesn't hear. She and Elizabeth are pulling so fast that the wagon bounces over at the curb, spilling Mark onto the sidewalk and scraping Elizabeth's heel. "Oh, why are we having so much trouble?" Anne cries. Elizabeth says they'll get bandaids when they get home and tells Mark to climb in again. There isn't time for tears and hugging now.

"Does it matter that Mark sang a Christmas carol?" Anne asks as they hurry along. "It won't make any difference, will it?"

Elizabeth says her father sings "Joy to the World" even in the middle of summer. "It doesn't matter what you sing," she says confidently. "It just matters _that_ you sing."

They are almost home when they see Aunt Margaret blocking their path. "Let me do the talking," Anne whispers. "It's all my fault."

She reaches Aunt Margaret first. "Excuse me, Miss Jorgenson, but we invited Elizabeth to help us bury Hans. This is my brother Mark and my name is Anna Marie and I'm sorry we're so late."

"Why aren't _you_ in church, Anna Marie?"

"It's our Sunday off..."

"Sunday _off_? Sounds like an Abrams."

"But you see..."

"What I see are three dirty children, one of them a liar. You said you were sick, Elizabeth, and now I see you're well enough to be pulling wagons. And you said you were going to read the Bible," she holds up Lois Lenski, "but I see you were reading a story book instead." And she drops the book into the wagon where it teeters on the edge for a moment and then falls to the ground. Elizabeth sees the pages flip past: little children in the sun, working in the fields, playing in the barn - busy, silent and secure.

"You go straight to bed," Margaret says to Elizabeth, "and you two," she glares at Mark and Anne, "go straight home. Whatever are you thinking of, to cross the highway by yourselves?"

"We do it all the time."

"Hush, Mark. Miss Jorgenson, why didn't you tell Elizabeth about the night we were born? Why doesn't she know?"

"Why should she?"

"Because it means we're going to be friends..."

"I doubt, I very much doubt, Anna Marie Abrams, whether you and Elizabeth Styve are going to be friends."

"But we are friends, we already are. And we always will be, I know."

"Run along, Anna Marie. And take these sticks with you."

"No, they're for Elizabeth. So she can witch for water too. If she can do it, it will be a sign..."

"Witch for water!" Aunt Margaret's voice is high and hissing as she takes Elizabeth's elbow, her fingers hard and boney. "Not in my yard."

"I don't think this is your yard, Miss Jorgenson."

Aunt Margaret's fingers dig into Elizabeth's arm. But before she can speak the bells from Holy Spirit ring, pouring cascades of cool notes, like water, into the hot air.

Anne and Mark turn to go. "Goodbye, Elizabeth, thank you for your help. I'll ask my father whether it's 'here' or 'air'. I'll let you know. We'll meet again. I know we will." She calls over her shoulder as she runs after Mark. "Goodbye, goodbye." And then she comes running back across the grass, just as Elizabeth is propelled up the stairs of the porch, and takes Elizabeth's hand. "We're going to be friends, I know we are, no matter what," she whispers loudly. "On your birthday remember me and I'll remember you: that's how we'll keep in touch."

Aunt Margaret's angry arm pushes Elizabeth up the stairs as Anne runs across the grass. "Race you home, Markie. Last one home's a rotten egg. Race you! Come, Mark. Run! Never mind about the wagon. Hurry!"

And the shiny red wagon, empty, is left standing at the corner of Seventh Street and Pillar Avenue.

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"You had stopped digging. You were telling me something and you were crying, some memory of your grandmother. The bank was as still and silent as a prayer meeting and the sun made the air shimmer like silk. Mark came screaming up to us, so frightened he couldn't speak. He hid his wet head in your lap as if he wanted to be buried. I saw the shoes standing on my skirt just when you screamed. When I looked up the water fell - dirty river water. It caught you with your mouth open; it filled my open eyes. And the old man laughed, and poured a second cup and then a third. He carried a brown bucket in the crook of his arm. We were paralyzed, too frightened to move. The water was dirty but cool. I tried to wipe my lips on the hem of my dress. Your legs were slippery with the mud the water made. All the while Mark was screaming, hiding his head in your stomach. The man kept raising his hand as if he was stroking us, but he didn't once touch us, or even try to. He laughed when he poured the second and the third cup - that's what I remember. Him laughing! And raising his hand as if he was given us the blessing of a benediction."

"Damning us, you mean."

"No, not damning. Releasing then."

"From what?"

"From the refuge."

"What refuge?"

"Their mighty fortress. Their rock of ages."

"Perhaps. Releasing then. We were lucky to get out so early."

"You can't get out.We aren't out."

"You'll see. We'll build our own refuge. A sanctuary."

"Why didn't we sing 'Who is This Host'?"

"Because we only knew it in Norwegian, I suppose. We didn't know it was for funerals."

"We sang it at the Una Sancta. That wasn't a funeral."

"I bet we didn't sing it because you said 'What do you mean 'host'? As in 'heavenly host'? As in 'guest'? As in 'Lord of hosts'? As in 'lift up'?"

"That's hoist."

"It wouldn't have stopped you saying it."

"Who is the host anyway?

"Anne, don't."

"'...arrayed in white...'"

"'It's a yellow bird' you would have said. We can't sing 'arrayed in white' for a yellow bird."

"I wonder whether it got to the border."

"What border?"

"Canada."

"Oh, I thought you meant heaven."

"Maybe I did."

"'Such a refuge...'"

"'there was given...'"

IN THE LISTENING SUMMERTIME

When the Bergstroms came, no one thought they'd stay that long. Three days maybe, a week at the most. The consulate said the visas would only take a day or two. There seemed to be a problem but everyone said it was minor.

It was June and school was out. Rebecca and Naomi left for Lutherland Bible Camp where they got to work in the kitchen all summer and swim whenever they wanted to. But Elizabeth was too young to go. What was she to do? When you're new to a school it takes awhile to make friends. And the girls at the church lived all over the city and maybe she didn't want to be friends with them anyway. All the people at church you were supposed to like, even love, especially if you were the minister's daughter but she didn't though she couldn't say that at home. Elizabeth thought it was going to be a very long summer. Her mother said something would turn up. How about walking to the library?

Elizabeth fell in love with the brick building sheltered under tall thick trees. The brown linoleum squeaked and the glass windows separating the children's section from the adults' were always clear and clean: small windows set in polished wood. Elizabeth began to walk there every day. At night she read in the double bed she usually shared with Naomi. With Naomi gone there weren't any arguments about who got which side or when the light should go off or whether Naomi could have a bed of her own. Elizabeth always kicked so much, Naomi said. Elizabeth slept with her dolls instead, all the dolls she brought when they moved to Seattle. Betsy, the rubber baby doll, and Eloise with the delicate porcelain head; Amanda with a body stiff as a ruler and Janet who had blond hair that you were supposed to be able to comb but couldn't. Elizabeth spread them out carefully, dressed in their nighties, and then she'd sleep in the middle.

Her mother thought it was a miracle none of the dolls fell out. "Naomi says you toss and turn so much."

"You would too if you had to sleep with *her*," Elizabeth said. "I *never* kick when I'm sleeping with my dolls."

And then the Bergstroms came, Norman and Crystal and Peter. Peter was sixteen now her mother said. Elizabeth could remember when Peter had visited them in Illinois on his family's last furlough from Japan.

"Do you still collect fireflies?" Peter asked.

"There aren't any in Seattle," said Elizabeth. "At least I haven't seen any here."

"It's just as well," Peter says. "It was cruel to catch them, to keep them in a jar. That's what I think. It was cruel."

Norman and Crystal will sleep in Rebecca's room, but there isn't a room for Peter. "It's a pity Peter isn't a girl," Elizabeth hears her mother say. "He could have shared Elizabeth's double bed. I hope he doesn't mind sleeping on the living room couch."

Peter doesn't mind. He doesn't seem to mind anything. Elizabeth wonders whether he minds having to move back and forth between countries just because his parents are missionaries. Elizabeth minds knowing her family could move any time, anywhere and always to a house the church would own, like nomads or exiles, having no home of their own. Perhaps going back and forth like Peter's family did was better than knowing you might always be moving on and never coming back.

Crystal and Norman have cases to repack. Across the living room are spread papers, books, and clothing in plastic covers, things they could never find in Japan: shoes for all of them, trousers for Norman and Peter, skirts long enough for Crystal. Norman is looking for documents which the consulate requires; Crystal is trying to pare the contents down.

Mary tries to help. She serves homemade cinnamon buns for breakfast and sets the table with her best wedding dishes every evening at half past six. Before the end of the week, however, the Bergstroms are told it will be at least a month until everything is approved. Norman and Crystal are aghast. They could return to the Mission Board house in Minneapolis. They could take rooms. Mary and Harold won't hear of it. Crystal and Norman will stay with them. There's plenty of room until Aunt Margaret arrives on the 21st of June.

Mary says she likes having someone in the house who calls her 'Mary' and sees her as a friend, not the 'minister's wife'. Someone she knew at Harmonia College, someone who also lives so far away from family. Harold says he could set up a speaking schedule so Crystal and Norman could talk about their work in the Japan mission and show their slides. June is a slow month, but Japan will draw a good crowd. Norman and Harold tell each other stories while they choose Bible themes and hymns to suit the program. Or rather Harold tells stories. Norman mostly listens, though sometimes Elizabeth wonders if he really hears.

"Make things come alive for them," Harold says. "You've got to catch their attention, Norman. What kind of pictures do you have?"

Her father didn't approve of Norman's slides, Elizabeth could tell. He held each slide up to the light of the window and frowned slightly: Norman's first convert standing in front of a clump of bamboo; the mission house (a stucco box with no sign of Japanese character or design); the Deacons of the church posed stiff and sober in the Sunday morning sun. "They're accurate, Norman, but they're not interesting," Harold pronounces.

"I've got some," Elizabeth hears Peter say. She's dusting the shelves on the buffet, moving each ornament one by one. "The temples in Kyoto and the great Buddha at Kamakura and the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. I could find them..."

"You think we'd show pictures of their heathen religion?" Norman asks vehemently. "What are you thinking of, Peter?"

Elizabeth goes over to Peter. He's sorting stamps at the coffee table, small squares with 'Nippon' written on every one. "I'd like to see them," she says. "All of them. Could I?"

"I don't know where they are," he says, without looking up.

"I'll trade you stamps," she says. "I have hundreds from the Stensons in Columbia." But when she returns the table is cleared and Peter is gone. Norman says he doesn't know where Peter went, maybe gone for a walk, he did that sometimes, without telling anyone. He always came back.

Elizabeth is delighted to have Peter at her house for a whole month. He's almost six feet tall and wears worn white shirts with the sleeves rolled up. His ears don't match and his hair falls in his eyes. He wears an old belt of his father's and at least four inches hang out if he forgets to wrap it through the loops of his baggy khaki trousers. Being with Peter is so comfortable she sometimes forgets he's a boy.

Peter unpacks his chess game and teaches Elizabeth how to play. He sets it on the coffee table and tells her the name of each piece, where it has to go and why. When they play he doesn't try to beat her, he doesn't even care who wins. They play on the floor or at the picnic table under the flowering plum tree, its burgundy leaves bright in the moist sun. Elizabeth asks Peter if he knows how to play cards. She's always wanted to learn but she isn't allowed. "I'm not either," he says.

"Why can't we? What's wrong with cards?"

"It's one of their rules," he says. "One of the rules they've forgotten the reason for."

They play scrabble instead and Chinese checkers and endless games of pit.

When they discover Peter will stay for nearly a month Elizabeth takes him to the library for a card. For 'home address' he puts down hers and says he wishes it were true, he doesn't want to go back to Japan. Elizabeth can't imagine. You live in one country and your parents live in another? What kind of a life is that? But Peter insists he wants to stay.

"Look," he says patiently, sweeping a hand around to include all the books on the shadowy shelves of the library. "All these books are written in English."

"Of course," says Elizabeth. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"Well think about it. In Japan, all the books are in Japanese. I can't read a word of them. I understand when they talk, but I can't read Japanese. I want books on myths, astronomy and totem poles. I want books on insects and dinosaurs. I want to read Mark Twain and King Arthur, Moby Dick and zoology. Last year in Minneapolis I read a dozen books a week and now I won't have any. Books are expensive to send and too heavy to carry. The Mission Board sent a set of the World Book encyclopaedia but who wants to read nothing but encyclopaedias? Besides the 'L' and 'O' were missing from the set."

"Don't you have English books at the mission school?"

"I don't go to school. I do correspondence with an English school in Tokyo and they send me one library book a month. Their books are awful - last year they sent me Hardy boys! I want to stay here, Elizabeth, where I can have all the books I want."

Peter has been talking so loudly the librarian glances over. "I understand," Elizabeth whispers. "If I hadn't found the library this summer I would have been so miserable. You can take books out on my card too, Peter. That's twelve every time we come."

Elizabeth shows Peter the chart with her name on it. She's trying to read everything in the children's section. In fact she started with 'A' and is working her way around. She's already read more than any other fifth grader. Peter tells her not to read them all, only the best, and not to finish a book she's bored with. "'In the beginning was the Word', Elizabeth. Remember hearing that?"

"Yes," she says. "Of course."

"I don't think words were the beginning. Something else, I think."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm going to find out."

They walk home along the wide sidewalks shaded with monkey trees and edged with rock gardens and ivy and rhododendron bushes. Both of them try to read while they're walking. They end up touching elbows to keep their balance. Finally Elizabeth says, "I'm getting dizzy, Peter. I'm going to throw up if I keep on reading while I walk."

They sit down on the steps leading down to the waterfront until her eyes stop spinning. Peter is paging rapidly through a book of poetry. "I've never read anything like this before," he says. "Just listen."

'These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
And the mystery
Sang alive.'

"I wonder why it says 'summertime of the dead'," he says, frowning slightly at the words.

"I like 'mystery sang alive'," says Elizabeth. "Read it again will you?"

But Peter has closed the book and is looking at her without seeing. "Perhaps in the beginning there was mystery," he says slowly, and his face is more sober than she's ever seen it before.

When they get home Peter lies in the garden on his stomach until he's read all the poems though his father says, "Dylan Thomas drank himself to death. What do you want to read him for, Peter?"

Mary says it's all right if Peter and Elizabeth ride the bus around Seattle. Elizabeth's never been allowed to go alone. They go to Green Lake on the number 6 Latona. For a dollar they rent bicycles for half a day and ride around once together and then go in opposite directions to see where they meet up again. At the Aqua Theatre they stop to watch the ducks, fat and happy ducks, overfed and arrogant. "They have everything they want," says Peter. "Look how smug and content they are. I don't really see what's wrong in being happy at least some of the time, do you, Elizabeth?"

Christians were supposed to be happy, Elizabeth knew, but Elizabeth had never heard Crystal laugh, not once since she came. And Peter's father looked as if he's afraid to close his eyes and too tired to keep them open. He read his Bible in the back yard every morning and talked as little as he could. But she thought Peter was happy. Just like Christians were taught: "Pay no thought to the morrow, what you shall eat or what you shall put on." He was even more Christian, dare she think it, than her parents. Her father certainly wasn't content. Always a hundred things he wanted to do, slamming the door as he ran out of the house as early as 6 a.m. and sometimes missing dinner altogether, without even calling her mother.

And her mother worried too much about when the trustees would repaint the parsonage. It wasn't painted before Elizabeth's family moved in and her mother didn't want Aunt Margaret to visit until it was. Aunt Margaret wouldn't think much of this parish if she came and found the wallpaper faded, paint peeling on the kitchen ceiling and the floor boards in the living room unwaxed and worn. Elizabeth knows her mother wants everything fixed up and can't complain with the Bergstroms here. Crystal has said to her mother, with a sigh, "It must be nice to have such a large house, Mary. In Japan we live in two rooms and I do laundry at the public facilities. Staying here is like a vacation for me."

Maybe her mother would tell Aunt Margaret to cancel her trip. Besides there wasn't any place for her to sleep. Elizabeth didn't want Aunt Margaret sharing her bed. Sleeping with her would be like lying with a coat hanger.

Elizabeth hoped the Bergstroms would stay for the whole summer. Hoped her parents would invite Peter to live with her family so he didn't have to go back to Japan. After all, weren't their mothers almost like sisters? Wasn't he almost like her brother?

One evening the adults stayed up to midnight talking about the mission in Japan. Crystal says she felt so isolated. They'd been there five years and still none of the women would shake hands with her. They just bowed, and bowed again, and muttered words she couldn't understand.

"They say 'namasta'," Peter said.

His mother carried on as if she hadn't heard. "And they make no attempt to learn English, even though I offer a class year after year."

Norman said he's weary of his sermons falling on deaf ears. The old men in the village hadn't stopped bathing naked in the hot springs at the river, even though he'd preached against it in church over and over again. They lay on their backs beneath the bridge, oblivious to their nakedness - or flaunting it, who could tell - but either way it wasn't right. Harold said he'd include the men - and Norman - in his prayers. God not only worked in mysterious but sometimes slow ways. Norman should remember that.

Elizabeth and Peter are playing chess, listening to every word. "And the men were naked and were not ashamed," Peter says softly.

"What did you say, Peter?" Norman asks.

"Nothing," he says.

"I thought you said something," Norman persists.

"Just helping Elizabeth with her game," Peter says, but he doesn't, play chess anymore that is, and when Elizabeth's mother says it's time for everyone to be off to bed and how can Peter get any sleep if they talk all night in the living room, Elizabeth finds him in the kitchen, sitting in the dark.

"It's time for devotions," she says. "They want you to come for prayers."

"I'm not coming," he says to her, his voice like sparks lighting up the dark.

"I'll sit with you," she says. "We can say our prayers to ourselves, in bed. I do that sometimes, do you?"

When he doesn't answer she asks, "What does it mean? When they bow, what is the word they say?"

"Namasta," he says in a whisper. "Namasta," fiercely. "'I honour the spirit in you'. Namasta. Namasta. And my mother calls it muttering."

That night Elizabeth dreams she is floating in a rock-lined pool, hidden in steam and warmth, unable to see clearly the faces frowning down at her, or see the fingers pointing, or hear the voices calling. Men's faces hide in the shadows, dark moons above the steam. Their mouths open rapidly, but no sound comes out, no voice is heard, no words given. When she looks down, she sees her bones are rocks, covered in moss, heavy and fixed.

When Elizabeth awakes the next morning the house is still. Her mother has left a note on the kitchen table. "We've taken Norman and Crystal to the consulate again. We didn't want to wake you two up." Where could Peter be? It is so quiet. Elizabeth looks out the window. Sky so blue she wants to hide her face in it, mountains so white and bold she thinks they're lined up waiting just to bow to her. She runs out to the raspberry bushes in her nightie and nibbles the fresh fruit, the grass cool on her bare feet.

"I thought you'd never get up." It's Peter and he's on the roof, squatting on the lookout her father had built beside the chimney. "Why don't you come up, Elizabeth? The view up here is magnificent."

What a day to see the mountains. Everywhere they surround the city, like a great cloud of witnesses, Elizabeth thinks. She and Peter rest their elbows on the wide chimney which reaches almost to her armpits. Mt. Rainier and Mt. Baker lean like bookends against the long shelf of the Cascades: Rainier at the south and Baker at the north, almost to Vancouver where Peter's plane will leave for Tokyo. Peter shakes his head. "When we went up Mt. Fuji I wanted to live there, above all the other mountains, at the top of the world. I think the mountains are the nicest place to be, don't you, Elizabeth?"

"To see or be?" Elizabeth interrupts. "I'd rather see the mountains than be in them."

Peter doesn't agree.

"Look," Elizabeth says, grabbing his arm. "You can see the ferry boats from here. I never knew you could." And if they squeeze right to the edge of the platform they can see the docks, see the Walla Walla just departing for Bremerton and the Hyak on its way to Vashon Island, the Yakima steaming back from Winslow. "The ferries, Peter. We can go to a different place every day. Do you want to?" Of course Peter wants to. They'll go tomorrow, early, pack a lunch, ride the ferries for the whole day, come home when it's evening.

That night Peter and Elizabeth play chess in the living room while they wait for supper. They've set the picnic table for Mary with blue willow plates and tupperware cups and they've made iced tea. Peter's parents are expected any minute and they'll have only an hour to eat before the meeting begins at Bethany Church. Mary is making tuna casserole and boiling eggs for egg salad. She's had to put the jello in the freezer, how else will it get ready in time?

Elizabeth holds a pawn in her hand, trying to decide what to do. Peter watches, not saying a word, when they hear the screen door slam.

"Busy, Mrs. Styve? I see you haven't been home today to get the dinner started earlier. I always have everything ready by lunchtime, keep it in the fridge. Saves rushing about you know."

Elizabeth can hear her mother's guarded voice. When Mrs. Monson starts talking there's no stopping her and she never knocks, just walks right in and then she says hello. The parsonage ought to be as open to the parishioners as the church, Mrs. Monson thinks. When she comes she doesn't go home till she's seen and said everything she wants to.

"I knew you weren't home today when I saw Elizabeth up there on your roof."

"She's allowed to go up anytime, Mrs. Monson. That's why we made the lookout, for the children."

"Yeah, I suppose some folks do like that sort of thing, but is she allowed to be up there half-naked?"

Elizabeth hears the rattle of a bowl, is it glass, does something drop? She is holding her breath and her arm has frozen in mid-air.

"What is it Eliza...?" says Peter.

"Shh..."

"Her nightdress, that's what she was wearing on your roof. Flaunting is more like it. From my window I could see clear through her nightie, all the way up to her crotch. And if I'm not mistaken, she wasn't even wearing panties."

"Elizabeth's nightdress is perfectly all right to wear in our yard as far as I'm concerned," Elizabeth's mother says, her voice almost an octave lower than usual.

"Perfectly all right to wear when she's keeping company with a young man?"

"Peter is the son of Pastor Bergstrom and his wife ..."

"Well, of course his being a pastor's son doesn't stop him from being male, does it, Mrs. Styve?" Mrs. Monson spits out the word 'male'. "I always made sure my girls dressed modest-like, as befits young Christian women, even in our own garden or in our house, Mrs. Styve. Perhaps in small towns people can behave like that, but this is a city."

"Peter and Elizabeth are children, Mrs. Monson."

"Children? They sure don't look like children. When Elizabeth came down that makeshift ladder - a dangerous arrangement in my opinion - her legs were bare almost to her waist and they sure didn't look like a child's legs to me. You working for the church doesn't mean your girl's going to stay out of trouble, you know. Why, have you heard about Pastor Bjerke's daughter...?"

"I have. Please excuse me, Mrs. Monson. I have company for supper. It isn't a good time for me to talk."

"Well sure, Mrs. Styve, but let me tell you, starting early is the secret. Then you'd have time to be sociable-like, which is not really so much to ask from our minister's wife, is it?"

Elizabeth's mother doesn't answer. "You serving tuna fish to company? Out here most of us serve salmon if we've got guests, Mrs. Styve. Perhaps you'd like me to give you a few recipes?" Again there is no answer. "Be seeing you, Mrs. Styve." The screen door slams.

"I think you ought to put the pawn there," says Peter.

"Right there, Elizabeth," he says, looking at her all the while.

But she neither sees nor hears him. Her mother stands behind Peter, carrot peeler in one hand. "Peter? Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth is on her feet in a flash, arms around her mother. "I hate her, Mummy, I hate her. She's awful."

"Hush, of course you don't hate her. She means well, Elizabeth."

"She doesn't. She's vicious. Just because she calls herself Christian doesn't mean she acts like one. I hate her." Elizabeth is adamant.

"God forgive me, right now I think I hate her, too." Mary sits down in the chair, her head thrown back and her arms outstretched.

"Now, who will help me scrape these carrots?"

They go to the kitchen together. Peter pours the iced tea; Elizabeth scrapes the carrots with a vengeance. Mary stands motionless, first at the window, then at the fridge, her hand paralyzed on the handle. She moves to Elizabeth, her arm around her waist; then to Peter, her hand on his shoulder. And finally sits down, spent, while Elizabeth says, "Don't worry, Mommy. Peter and I will serve tonight."

In the morning Mary helps Elizabeth and Peter pack lunches, even before she prepares breakfast for Crystal and Norman: egg salad sandwiches and celery sticks with peanut butter; small containers of blueberries from the freezer and a thermos of lemonade; chocolate chip cookies and a bag of chips apiece.

"You have a wonderful day, you two. It couldn't be a nicer day for riding on the Sound."

They're taking the Illahee to Winslow today. There's a good beach to walk along and the trip is only half an hour. They can try Bremerton and Vashon and maybe even Mukilteo later.

On the ferry they go up to the top deck, right out in the front, cover their ears when they hear the whistle blast, and duck as sea gulls come swooping over. The thin line of beach along the west edge of the Sound is just a wrinkle between the blue of sky and water. Magnolia Bluff and Queen Anne Hill quickly fade behind them. The Olympic Mountains slice through the clouded sky.

Peter and Elizabeth take off their shoes just beyond the ferry terminal. The tide is out as far as it can go and slate-solid sand stretches all the way to the point, perfect for running. "Race you, Peter," Elizabeth calls, and she is off, racing Peter and the waves, the sea gulls and the wind. The ripples of the sand are tough ropes against her soles, the sand hard and firm. At the point she looks back and sees Peter walking slowly with his head thrown back as if he were trying to position himself against the sky and sea and sand. Looking to the hills on his right, covered in fir, and the water on his left. Looking at the height of the cloudless sky, the stretch of the horizon. He waves to her but does not increase his step. She sits down on a barnacle-covered boulder to wait, wrinkles up her nose at the smell of salt air and rotting seaweed, and listens to the shreik of sea gulls passing over.

A day won't be enough. They need time to skip pebbles, build a sand castle, gather driftwood for polishing at home, hike to the next bay, walk through the woods, gather pine cones. They need time to go wading when the tide comes in and swing ropes of kelp high above their heads. Time to play catch and perhaps follow-the-leader, if Peter doesn't think it's silly, that is. Time to place tide markers and measure the movement of the water.

Elizabeth collects shells while she waits: razor clams and mussells and small pink ovals for stringing, shells rinsed smooth in the sharp salt water. By the time Peter joins her she has a pile of shells, and one perfect sand dollar, miraculously preserved. Peter's never seen a sand dollar, never heard the legend.

"Never seen one? Look," and she cradles the flat sphere in the palm of her hand. "They're most beautiful when they're dead - like this one - bleached white with the patterns all clear. Everything means something, Peter: the five slits on the underside are the wounds in the Body of Christ and in the center is the Star of Bethlehem and on the top side is the pattern of an Easter lily and inside..."

"Don't, Elizabeth. Don't break it."

"But I want to show you the doves inside, five of them, each smaller than a shirt button. They're beautiful."

"Don't break it, Elizabeth."

"Peter, there's lots more. They're everywhere. This one is nothing special."

She's pressing it hard, trying to snap the white disc in two. "I always throw the doves into the air," she says. "I imagine them flying away. They're so light they just float on the wind."

"Stop." He grabs her shoulder so tightly she cries out, and he pulls the shell out of her hand. His eyes are intense and angry. "You mustn't break it."

"All right, I won't," she says quietly, frightened by his insistence. "You keep it, take it to Japan. Carry the doves with you."

Peter studies the shell in his hand. "It is perfect," he says quietly. "How can something dead be so perfect?"

Elizabeth says they should go around the point, get away from the summer homes and ferry blasts and water that is full of oil and sewage. They hike through the woods, cutting across the arm of land that juts into the bay. Douglas firs tower above them, so high and wide in girth they could be Redwoods. Peter sits down on the moss. Here it's cool from the noon sun, and quiet, and they are protected by the ancient woods. "In a bamboo forest," Peter says, "the trees are dense, but light always shines through, not dark like here."

Elizabeth has never seen bamboo, not growing that is. Is it brown? Is it thin as matchsticks or thick as telephone poles? What's it good for, does it flower or bloom? "I'll come visit you in Japan, Peter. Why not? When I'm older, maybe. Will you still be there?"

Peter isn't listening. He's lying on his back, staring at the tops of the trees. "You know the worst thing about Japan, Elizabeth? I don't know why we're there." He is throwing lumps of moss at the tree, never missing, always hitting the bark squarely in the middle of the trunk. "The ones who come to our church are more interested in westerners than in God. That's not the way it's supposed to be, is it?" Elizabeth has been digging in the moss herself, tearing bits away from the bark at the wide base of the tree.

"Do you ever go to the hot spring pools in the river," she asks. "Where the men don't wear any clothes. The ones your father was talking about?"

"No," says Peter quietly, almost absent-mindedly, and then shouts it. "No!" He reaches for a long rotting stick and tosses it to Elizabeth. "But I will when we get back. First thing. Those men are my friends, the only friends I've got."

"What do you do all day, if you don't go to school?"

He has turned onto his stomach, his cheek pressed into the moss, and she wonders if he has heard. "What do you do?"

"What do I do?"

"During the day, what do you do?"

"I go to the sanctuary."

"You go to church?"

"No." He's talking into the moss.

"I thought sanctuary was the church, where you worship."

"Sanctuary is where you're safe, Elizabeth."

"What kind of sanctuary then? A temple?"

"No." He turns over and looks at her. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not. Why would I laugh?"

"I go to a sanctuary for dragonflies."

"Oh."

"The island we live on is Shikoku, hundreds of miles from Tokyo. The island should belong to the tombo, - I mean the dragonflies. So many species live there you might never find all of them. I spent the year before our furlough began in the swamp, watching for the colors of red or yellow or blue racing through the air. They sometimes move as fast as a car on the freeway." Peter looks up at Elizabeth. "In the spring the village announced plans to turn the swamp into a sport stadium. I took my collection of dragonflies to the village council and showed them the ones I'd mounted, nearly a hundred different species, some of them as wide as my hand and all of them as bright as rainbows. Everyone knew I spent my time in the swamp. 'Tombo freak' they called me. When I showed them the dragonflies they wrote to a botanist in Tokyo. He came and said there were species in my collection that existed nowhere else in the world. The village was given a grant to protect the swamp - and the dragonflies - to build an 'akitsu-shima', a 'sanctuary for dragonflies'. They asked if I would contribute my collection to a museum when it was built."

"I want to see them when I come."

"You won't be able to."

"I _will_ come to Japan, you'll see."

"But you won't be able to see the dragonflies."

"Why not?"

She can't see Peter's face, wonders if he's heard.

"Why not, Peter?"

"They've been destroyed."

"How?"

"They've been burned, every one of them."

"Tell me how it happened, Peter."

His voice is muffled, indistinct. "My father destroyed them the day my examination results came from the correspondence school. I had failed everything but English. He blamed the dragonflies. He said I was a fool, spending all that time in the swamp when I should have been doing schoolwork. He said I'd never amount to anything if I didn't do well in school."

"Your _father_ burned them?"

"Yes. And my scrapbook too, drawings of every kind I'd ever seen."

Peter's voice sounds like tears, but his eyes are blank and empty as he sits up, staring at Elizabeth. "The dragonflies were like my brothers, Elizabeth. I knew them all by name. Come on, let's go. Let's hike down to the water. It's too dark in here." And Peter takes off ahead of her, crashing his walking stick against every trunk he passes.

When they leave the woods they are at the ridge of a cliff, a cliff whose bank forms an amphitheatre, whose stage is the sea, whose seats are dozens of layered and beached bare logs, grey and dry. The sky here is faded white, the sand a crescent moon, the logs bleached bones. "It's like the balcony of a church," says Elizabeth in a whisper.

"You go on down, Elizabeth. Preach a sermon, sing a song. I'll see if I can hear you from up here."

Elizabeth begins running down the logs, jumping with both feet, or leaping from one foot to another. She counts as she jumps: 2,4,6. At 56 she is only halfway down. She pauses to look up at Peter. He is standing at the top, silhouetted against the sky. He waves.

When Elizabeth reaches the bottom she is out of breath, off balance. The logs reach up on both sides, like the wings of a dove, like a book opened wide, like a broken bowl. She stands in the middle of the sand stage. She needs a pulpit. She finds one just in front of her: a wet log, shorter than the others and thick. Upended, it is just the right height. She rests both hands on the rough surface. "Peter?" She is unprepared for the roaring answer. Dozens of 'Peters' respond, an echo like the flight of a gull, swooping down at her. She is encircled by voices, a chorus of 'Peters' repeated in every octave, a crescendo of rhythm. The echo is loud, insistent, like the beating of drums. She raises her hands to her ears and moves away from the pulpit.

Instantly, silence. Only the sound of waves softly rushing against the pebbles and the sand.

She looks up to the ridge of the cliff. She can't see Peter's face. Both his hands are raised in greeting however, a dark shape hung against the empty sky. A voice deeper, closer than if he were standing next to her says, "Elizabeth, I hear you. You can begin. I'm waiting. 'In the beginning was the Word'! Say it like our fathers do in church." His words are followed by a burst of laughter.

She will sing. A solo. She steps well away from the pulpit. You don't want to sing into the mike. She will wear a robe, of royal blue, lined in white satin. She will sing 'Who is this Host?' Unaccompanied. And please, no applause. We are, after all, in the House of the Lord. She takes a deep breath.

"Elizabeth Styve will sing the entire hymn without taking a breath."

Elizabeth and Naomi practice this in church. If Naomi stepped on her toe before the hymn began, Elizabeth knew she was not to breathe before the end of the stanza. Naomi always made it to the end of the stanza. Elizabeth never did. She couldn't make it through tunnels without breathing either. Naomi could. Elizabeth thought Naomi cheated. She did things like that - cheat, all the time. Elizabeth thought Naomi wasn't very Christian. But she could do it this time, she knew. Particularly if she didn't have an organ slowing her down.

Who is this host arrayed in white
Like thousand snowclad mountains bright,
That stands with palms and sings their psalms
Before the throne of light?
On earth they wept through bitter years;
Now God has wiped away their tears,
Andfreedthemfromtheirfears.

She made it! The entire stanza without taking a breath. She bows slightly. She doesn't mind the silence. You don't clap in church. And a singer shouldn't smile either, or look proud. That's why you wear a robe. In a robe you are 'singer', an exact replica of everyone else. Naomi will never believe it, even if Elizabeth swears on a Bible which you're not supposed to do. Elizabeth can't stop grinning, she is proud.

Scripture next.

Elizabeth moves back to the pulpit and opens the heavy Bible - leather bound with soft tissue pages. She motions everyone to stand for the reading of the text.

"In the beginning was...the.." Elizabeth pauses. What was in the beginning? If it was 'the Word', who spoke the word? If it was 'the mystery', who made the mystery? Elizabeth's breath has stopped and she feels an avalanche of cold race through her body. In the silence the waves and wind whisper 'beginning'. She has forgotten about the echo. Like a spiral, a lassoo, an antiphonal whirlwind, it surrounds her, the wind whipping repetition: "in the beginning ...the beginning...the beginning". In a deafening rush comes the accumulated echo, a dirvish dance accompanied by the turning of the wind and the lifting of the waves. She is frightened by the rhythm, by the escalating answer. This is not echo. This is choir: insistent and prophetic.

She searches for Peter but she is blinded by the sun. When she moves away from the pulpit there is silence. Only the shifting whisper of the waves: "beginning...beginning...begin" She bows her head.

When she lifts her eyes she sees Peter hopping down the logs. "You go up, Elizabeth. I could hear every word, clear as a bell. But why did you sing so fast? All the words were running together."

"If you stand at the log the echo is enormous, Peter. Look." She stands in front of the pulpit and shouts'hello'. There is no answer now. "That's funny."

"You go on up, Elizabeth. I'm going to read Dylan Thomas." He pulls the book from his back pocket. "Listen. 'Rage, rage, rage against the dying of the light'. When you hear 'rage' repeated it won't be an echo!" Immediately they hear it, a long sucking breath, one sound only, drawn out: 'Rage'.

"This place is peculiar, Peter. I don't want to go up. These are voices, not echoes." Elizabeth's voice is a whisper.

"No one's here. Don't be frightened. I'll be able to see you all the time, Elizabeth."

When she gets to the top she sits on the wide log, takes off her sneakers and squishes her toes into the bone white sand. Peter is standing at the pulpit. He waves widely to her. When he begins reading she hears nothing on the brow of the hill but the stroking of the wind.

And then like single pebbles dropped one by one into water, sinking into darkness, she hears the words.

and you and me
who see
rage

and you and me
danced in a bay
too late
grieved
too late
and you good
and me wise
do not go
and me blind
and you gentle
do not go
sang the sun
father
bless
father bless me
on the sad height
curse father
fierce tears
rage
do not go
do not

Peter stands as still as a soldier at attention. And then he bows so low she thinks he will fall. He turns and walks to the edge of the water, stoops to collect a handful of stones and hurls them hard into the waves as if he were attacking an enemy from the sea. The stones explode like gunfire, one after another, a spray of limestone and granite sliding into salt waves. From his pocket he takes the sand dollar and slings it high into the air. She can see it glittering in the sun, higher and higher, before it sinks into the sea.

In the silence she hears him crying, fierce, like a caged animal.

How long will it take her to get to him? She stumbles twice and scrapes her knee, rushes back to collect her sneakers, catches her ankle against a stone and forces herself to walk slowly from log to log, her eyes glued to each step.

When she reaches the sand he is gone.

Elizabeth huddles on the soft indentation where Peter's feet had been a minute ago and watches the heavens open. The sky roars towards her, then recedes, and the waters roll back like a tsunami. Behind her the beached logs clatter like dry bones and in front of her the belly of the sea is black and wet.

The end had come. Judgement Day. When one is taken and one left. Peter had been taken; she was left. In the twinkling of an eye, just like the Bible said. Fear spreads out from her belly like arms of an octopus, paralyzing and choking her. Would she be left on the sand for all eternity - endless time -

forever? Her mouth is stuffed with sand. She crouches against the ground, her knees knotted under her. Trembling.

How long was forever?

She is alone between the sea and the ladder of logs, afraid to return to the pulpit voices and too wary to sit. She shouts and shouts above the swishing of the waves, "Peter. Peter. Peter!"

Elizabeth feels her breath race through her bones, looking for a hiding place. She presses her face into the sand. The sea rises, the sky lowers, the mountains slide from their heights. She curls up tighter, defenceless as a shell tossed up along the shore.

When she lifts her face a host of crows leap into the air, broad wings stretched against her intrusion. She sees Peter on the hillside, nearly hidden by bushes of Scotch bloom. Had he been there all the time? She climbs slowly towards him. He is rubbing the neck of a narrow garter snake and the tongue darts slowly in and out. When she says "Peter?" he turns to look at her and with a slither the snake disappears into the gravel and the dust.

"It was like we were talking," says Peter. "I was hoping you'd get here before he disappeared. These garter snakes are everywhere. Come, I want to show you something."

"I'm frightened, Peter." But he doesn't hear.

Behind the gorse bushes is a small cirle of stones. Peter squats down. In the center is a snake skin, as wispy as a feather and as intricate as a boned fish, perfectly preserved.

"Sometimes you can actually see perfection," Peter whispers. "Take a look." He beams at her.

"Are you all right, Peter?"

"Of course. "

"I was so frightened. I couldn't find you. And there were voices, whispering. And I thought the end had come and I had been left. I couldn't breathe and..." Elizabeth's voice trails off in tears, fear flooding again into her bones and her belly. Peter's arms are around her in an instant and his hands wipe the hair against her cheek. He stares out at the sea, white mist blurring the clear line of the horizon. "Why do they frighten us so? They feed us stones when we need bread." He looks down at Elizabeth. "When you come to Japan I'm going to take you to the firefly garden, Elizabeth."

"A garden of fireflies?"

"Yes. 'Kodomonokuni - For the sake of the children'. They catch fireflies from all over Japan and bring them to a wooded garden in Tokyo. They give children bamboo cages and light candles in the garden and the adults drink tea and talk in whispers while the children run as long and as late as they like and catch as many fireflies as they can and sometimes they let them go again and sometimes they take them home." He is out of breath with telling her, with wanting to comfort and console her.

A firefly garden! Elizabeth can see the children in tightly wrapped kimono pulled up along their thighs, running across the dark grass, chasing fireflies. "Look! Run! Quickly. Don't let them get away. Over there!" Little lights everywhere leading the children on, flickering with promise. Each flicker a smile, a knowing nod, a beckoning to things beyond, to things unseen. The fireflies: a guide, a gift. As elusive as a moonbeam or a dream; as haunting as the foghorn; as comforting and fragile as a friend.

"The garden is a sanctuary for fireflies," Peter says slowly.

"It sounds like a sanctuary for children," says Elizabeth. "We'll go see it when I come."

Going back to the ferry, they run the entire way along the graveyard of the shore, skipping over crab skeletons and driftwood, the fluted edges of abandoned clam shells, and barnacle rocks looking like sponges of grey. The dried seaweed along the tide line is crisp as fallen leaves and the colours as varied as autumn. They dare each other to turn their backs on the incoming waves and run through the shallow spread of water, knees high, splashing, laughing. Peter swings a dried brown kelp round and round his head, whipping the sky and clouds and sea. "I'll take care of you, Elizabeth. With this whip! Don't you worry, neither one of us will be taken without the other. We'll stay together." He drops the kelp and reaches for her hand. "Come, race you. Let's run the rest of the way together."

The ferry has arrived when they reach the point. No longer playing, they race for the ramp and arrive with only a minute to spare. On the highest deck they turn their faces into the salted wind and watch the waves, the slow moon, and the city lights flickering like thousands of insignificant fireflies.

"We haven't seen any yet," Elizabeth says. "Fireflies I mean. I don't think we're going to."

"Maybe we never did," says Peter. "Maybe we imagined them. Maybe there aren't any fireflies. Maybe there aren't any firefly gardens. Maybe there aren't any dragonflies either. Maybe there never were." And his voice is bitter and there is none of the soft comfort he spoke by the sea. Elizabeth puts her arm in his and feels the salt spray spread like tears on her cheeks.

Peter and Elizabeth are busy as the days go by. They pick raspberries for jam and ride every ferry from terminal 52. They play duets at the piano, mostly hymns, and make up new words which they whisper to each other. They play hopscotch and mow the lawn and wash the car the day before Aunt Margaret is to come. No one was very happy about her arrival but what could be done? Aunt Margaret never changed her plans.

Her train is to arrive at 5.35 p.m. on the 21st of June. At 5.30 everyone is in the back garden, waiting for Harold. Mary has served lemonade; empty glasses stand on the picnic table. Crystal's white vinyl purse rests against the rusted legs of the lawn chair. Elizabeth and Peter are silent. There is no point in starting a new game - Harold is expected any moment. Crystal and Mary and Norman sit in silence. Margaret will arrive unmet. It is unthinkable.

At 6 Harold phones and says he is unavoidably delayed and he'll get Margaret as soon as he can - her trip was 24 hours, another hour or two wouldn't hurt. "I'm ordering her a taxi," Elizabeth hears her mother say to Crystal and Norman. Elizabeth knows taxis are only for emergencies, once in a lifetime perhaps, and only for life and death or errands of mercy. Her father will never forgive the expense. He didn't care for Aunt Margaret, she knew. Was he making her wait on purpose? Elizabeth is horrified at the thought. How could he be a Christian and be so deliberately mean to Aunt Margaret?

And where was Aunt Margaret going to sleep? Her mother said Aunt Margaret was sleeping in the recreation room. Her father said Aunt Margaret should share Elizabeth's bed. "A few kicks from Elizabeth wouldn't hurt your sister," he had said. "Might even do her good."

It was like a tug of war. Her mother was putting Aunt Margaret in the basement to win against her father. Elizabeth hated making Aunt Margaret feel so unwelcome. Elizabeth made up her mind. Aunt Margaret could share her room. She smiled at Peter. "I've figured something out," she said. "I'm ready to make a move." He grinned at her. With Peter you never needed to explain.

When the taxi arrived Elizabeth took Aunt Margaret's overnight case and led her down the hall. When they got to the door of Elizabeth's room Aunt Margaret said, "Well, well. Dolls! A big girl like you still playing with dolls?"

"We'll put your things in the basement," Elizabeth said. "Mother says you're sleeping in the recreation room."

On the 30th of June the Bergstrom's visas come through. Elizabeth cannot sleep. The Bergstroms are leaving before 7 in the morning and she and Peter have been sent to bed early. Elizabeth can hear Crystal's voice, low and resigned, through the register. Norman's answer is just as dreary. They are not happy to be going, Elizabeth thinks. Why are they going then? Peter has hardly said a word to her all day. His eyes have watched her, but when she suggested a last game of badminton he said maybe later. When she said let's play the piano, he said he had to finish packing. When she got up to do the dishes, expecting he would help, he said he thought he'd have a cup of coffee first. He'd never had a cup of coffee after dinner before, and he'd never joined their parents while they drank theirs. She wished Peter had never come, that the Bergstroms had flown to Tokyo from Minneapolis, that Americans needed to be saved and not the Japanese, that summer was over and her sisters were home.

Ever since yesterday Peter had been so funny and distant. They had spent their last day riding around Green Lake until they got caught in the rain - heavy, dense rain, unusual for the coast. They walked the bikes back to the shop, shivered in the bus shelter and arrived home, drenched and cold, to an empty house. "We'll have to take a shower," said Elizabeth, "or we'll catch our death of cold."

"You go first. Just don't use up all the hot water."

Elizabeth is quickly finished, wraps herself in her pink quilted robe and says she'll make lemon tea to have as soon as Peter's finished. "We'll read in bed," says Elizabeth. "I want to finish The Little Prince. Look I've made us hot water bottles. Now I'm sure we won't catch cold."

The lamp casts a warm light in Elizabeth's room. Outside it is as dark as night but the rain on the roof is comforting, a benediction. Elizabeth leans against Peter's shoulder, comfortable against the wall of flowered pillowcases, and asks him to begin with the Prince and the fox. "Start with 'What is essential is invisible to the eye' and read to 'Friends must observe the proper rites'". Elizabeth repeats the familiar lines as if she is delivering a sermon. She knows the lines better than Peter does, but she wants them read aloud, wants to close her eyes and see the little Prince who came from so far away, so full of questions and intensity.

But soon, too soon, Peter says, "Elizabeth, I don't think this is such a good idea."

"But I love this story, Peter, don't you?"

"Of course I do. I don't think you understand."

"Of course I understand. It's about being friends."

"Let's get up, Elizabeth."

"I like to listen to you read. Being in bed with the rain and the dark is cozy. Please read some more."

"No." Peter seems angry. He is angry. She has never seen him angry. "No, no more" and he gets up swiftly and walks out the front door, straight into the rain without even a raincoat or an umbrella. She watches him hesitate at the sidewalk and then turn right, his head down against the rain, walking into the fog and mist, his hands shoved into his pockets. She takes the book and reads a little to herself but it's not the same. When he comes back he is drenched, his hair and clothes dripping water, and when he comes to the door of her room she thinks he looks older - almost as tired and resigned as Norman.

"I thought we could have finished The Little Prince before you went, Peter. Do you think the story is too childish? Did you want to read something else?"

"Get up, Elizabeth, get dressed. I'm not going to read to you any more."

"Do you want me to read to you?"

"No! What would our parents think if they came home and found us reading in your bed?"

"What do you mean? We read together all the time."

And Elizabeth, who is just 12, and Peter, a tall 16, do not spend the rest of the day, their last day, together.

Elizabeth can see the lights from the passing cars reflected on her ceiling. She has opened the venetian blinds and only the thin nylon of the Priscilla curtains covers the night. Every time a car passes their house headlights race across her ceiling. Like fireflies. On again, off again. Light, then dark. There are no fireflies in Seattle. No gardens for children to chase and find the little lightning bugs. No place to protect the fireflies or the children. She will never see one again.

She cannot sleep. The night is so busy, so lonely.

Elizabeth hears her father check the front door, hears the toilet flush, the mantle clock in the living room strike 11. Has she been asleep or not? Is Peter asleep? "Peter," she whispers at the door of her room and moves into the living room, "are you asleep?" He sits up, his faded pajamas twisted around his body. He grins at her. He's _not_ cross. "Well, if I had been I wouldn't be now. But I wasn't. Were you?"

"No, I can't sleep. I feel so sad."

"I do too. Japan's so far away. It isn't even the same _day_ in Japan as it is here."

Elizabeth hates the thought of it. So far, so long, so finished. "Why can't you stay with us? Did you ask your parents?"

"I did. Today." Elizabeth had no idea. "Your parents and mine have talked about it, a lot. About my staying here and going to school with you. All the books I want, English everywhere. But my mother says I'm too young to be left here alone. I'm _not_ too young, Elizabeth. I'm too young to go, not to stay."

Elizabeth is sitting on the floor by the couch, shivering though she's not cold. "You should get back to bed. I'll stay with you until you get to sleep." He is whispering while they tiptoe back into Elizabeth's room.

"I'll move my dolls," Elizabeth says, and shoves the dolls onto the chair beside her bed. She doesn't even make them comfortable. Peter in his father's old pajamas and Elizabeth in her nightie that barely covers her knees climb into her double bed. "Who will come to the library with me? Play chess? Go bike riding?" Not even leaving her friends in Fox River was as sad as this. Why was everything always ending?

Elizabeth lies with Peter's hand in hers. She wants to memorize his hand, the long fingers and the softness of the palm. She will know him by his hand. She faces him, his hand pressed against her cheek, and listens to him talk. She is tired now, so weary. Is there nothing to stop this terrible departing?

Elizabeth watches the lights race across her ceiling, faster than before, harsh and furious in their hurry, like Peter's words. There isn't space enough between his words for Elizabeth to speak. She holds his hand more tightly. If he goes, they'll have to take her too. "I want to tell you something, Elizabeth. In Japan, on the night the rice is planted the men go to a shed which sits on the temple grounds in the hills of bamboo, a place above the village so quiet you could sit all day and never hear another voice. They take sake and drink the whole night. In the morning no one is at work - only the women are on the paths, smiling to each other. It's tradition. But my father preaches against it. He's like a snowplough clearing a path through a wall of concrete." Peter lifts himself on his elbow as if he is addressing the entire room, the dolls and stuffed animals and flashing lights, their parents and Aunt Margaret, maybe even the whole entire world. His voice is a hoarse whisper. "The

Japanese aren't sinners, Elizabeth, we are! They aren't lost, we are! They aren't damned, we are! Elizabeth! Elizabeth?" But Elizabeth is asleep, the sound of sake and snowplough and Japan, damned, Japan, echoing in her sleep. She is motionless beside her friend Peter who is so full of words and fear tonight. She doesn't hear the doubt in his voice, nor see his wide eyes in the dim light, nor hear him cry as he wraps his arms around her, crying into her hair, her body tightly warm against him.

Elizabeth dreams. A huge white snowstorm, a solid wall of impenetrability. White, immutable; permanent, solid. Cold. Heavy. The wall flickers black, blinks white again. Solid black. She shivers. The snowplough, a monster, pushes against the solid wall, silently, hopelessly. "Namasta, namasta." She hears the hissing of the syllables.

Her eyes open wide. The overhead light blinds her. Beside her Peter is already sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

Aunt Margaret stands in the doorway, a mustard scarf tied tightly around her unruly auburn waves, a thin striped robe of brown wrapped around her narrow body. "So," she says. Followed by that hateful bark. "What do you two children think you're doing?" Her anger nearly makes her glow. "Move," she hisses at Peter. "Get out of Elizabeth's bed."

Elizabeth tries to say, "We were just talking, Aunt Margaret," but she can't make her voice come out. Aunt Margaret moves to let Peter pass. The look she gives Elizabeth is scornful and contemptuous. "So this is why you didn't want to share your room with me?"

Elizabeth says nothing. She waits for Aunt Margaret to turn off the light, to close the door tightly. And then she reaches for her dolls, for Amanda and Betsy and Eloise and Janet, all of them in a jumble in the Windsor chair beside her bed.

In the morning when her mother comes to waken Elizabeth, to tell her that the Bergstroms left so early there was no point in disturbing her, Mary sees the doll with the stiff blond hair has cracked her nose and the rubber doll has a dent in her head. The doll with the porcelain face is shattered, face down on the floor. And the arm of Amanda is clenched in Elizabeth's left hand and the rest of the body is held in her right. All the dolls in disarray, scattered on Elizabeth's bedroom floor, broken and bruised and abandoned.

SORROW, SING SORROW

"...wherewith in sympathy
Sing sorrow, sorrow: but let the good prevail."

AGAMEMNON
Aeschylus

So Harold said, "No, Rebecca. You can't go out to play. It's too cold. A blizzard is blowing and the wind is fierce. Your face will get frostbitten; snow will get in your eyes. You must stay inside."

Rebecca picked up the telephone receiver, stood on a chair to take it off its stiff hook, and whispered into the black dots. "God, it's Rebecca." (Can you hear her throaty child's voice?) "May I go out to play?"

Standing there on the painted chair, holding the heavy phone, she waited.

When she hung up she went back to play, to sit at her peg board and work in silence. She was like that, she listened. Listened and obeyed.

This you need to know.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

On most Sundays in the church year Mary flutters busily about the sanctuary before going to help Harold greet people in the narthex. On most Sundays she takes the flowers from the altar - lean white lilies at Easter; velvet poinsettas at Christmas - and asks a member of the Leah Circle to bring them to the sick and shut-in at the old folks home. On most Sundays Mary hangs up robes in the choir room and turns off coffee urns in the kitchen, wipes the candle snuffers behind the altar and smooths Harold's surplice and stoles in the sacristy. Most Sundays of the year Mary sings the recessional hymn under her breath as she goes about her tasks and thinks what she'll say when she greets people at the door.

But today, Easter Sunday and the busiest Sunday in the church year, Mary is sitting in the sacristy behind the altar. She rests her elbow on the sill and draws crosses, three at a time, on the dusty pane. Easter Sunday was different this year. Where was the hope? Where the joy? Where had the glory gone?

Today the sanctuary had been full as it always was on Easter Sunday when so many visitors came. They wore new spring outfits and hats to match and they looked slightly confused about when to stand up during the singing of the liturgy. Some visitors didn't sing at all, not even for "Up from the grave He arose", and they expected a short sermon, one that would get them home in good time for dinner. Mary knew. She watched them come every year, and not come in between. She didn't usually mind, but today she did - she wished the visitors hadn't come at all; she wished *she* hadn't come. This year she preferred Good Friday when Harold and the retired Reverend Ofstedahl had taken turns preaching on the Seven Last Words from noon to 3 p.m. The people who came to the sanctuary on Good Friday were mourners, faithful ones who came to remember and lament the death of the Lord. They didn't come to parade new spring or sing joyful songs. They came to acknowledge death, not deny or disguise it. On Good Friday parishioners wore dark coats and sat singly in the pews. They weren't ignorant of the rituals or the words. The widowed came, alone, and the old and the recently bereaved. "Come unto me all ye who are weary." The unemployed and the street people came on Good Friday because then coming alone was less noticeable, and the sanctuary was warm.

Last Friday a woman had begun sobbing when Pastor Ofstedahl read "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." She cried so loudly that Pastor Ofstedahl paused, started again and then sat down. He didn't say anything on the Word at all. During the ten minutes he would have preached, the church was silent except for the woman's crying. That's the way it should be, Mary thought. Silence and sighs; tears and lamentation. There was nothing to say to death. Harold would have raised his voice over the woman's cries. He would have spoken louder, and longer. Mary was glad for Pastor Ofstedahl, and for the woman.

The words of the Good Friday hymn have stayed in Mary's mind. "Should thy mercy send me Sorrow, toil, and woe." She couldn't recall the text for Harold's sermon today , or the point of it. What had he preached on? She couldn't remember the choir anthemn. And who had read the Old Testament lesson? She didn't care.

The maroon curtain covering the altar door shrugs dust when Mary moves it aside. She squints as she surveys the rows of empty pews. The sanctuary is empty except for her children. Naomi and Elizabeth are playing hopscotch on the squares of spotted sunlight. Rebecca is playing the piano, whispering "Till we cast our crowns before Thee" over and over. She can't get the rhythm right, but she won't give up. She's frowning in concentration. Mary pauses and sings the line for Rebecca, her voice piercing the dark sanctuary like a ray of sunshine. She pats Naomi and Elizabeth's braids absentmindedly as she passes them in the center aisle.

Through the crowd of people in the narthex Mary can see Harold shaking hands by the door. Harold won't let anyone get by him without a greeting. Not everyone wants to say hello to the pastor, especially those who didn't want to come to church at all, but Harold reaches out his hand to intercept anyone who might be trying to slip past in silence. Harold has the ushers lock all but the center door where he now stands, determined not to miss a soul. He can carry on two conversations at once, often holds the hands of two people while talking to a third, and introduces people to each other who don't always want to meet.

He used to beckon to one of his girls to come and shake hands with a newcomer. How many times had Mary seen her girls standing with Harold's hand on one of their heads, talking to a stranger. Once Mary saw a short man take Elizabeth's hand in both of his and rub his finger over and over her palm while Harold was talking. The man's eyes never blinked and his beard was so big Mary couldn't see his mouth. Harold laughed when Mary told him. He said Mary was imagining things. But now Mary told the girls to stay in the sanctuary until she and Harold had finished greeting people at the door. Sometimes the girls played tag between the pews or helped Jake count the offering. They collected bulletins and ordered the hymnbooks. Sometimes Naomi preached from the pulpit and Elizabeth sang solos at the lectern. Once they dared each other to go behind the altar railing, but Rebecca caught them just in time. Rebecca always practiced the piano while they waited for their parents. She didn't think it was right to play in the sanctuary.

Mary sees Harold talking to old man Grimsrud who is spending his first Easter without Ida. Could Mary find someone to take Grimsrud home for dinner? Cora Thorkelson asks Mary to find her a ride to the Hearthstone Home. Her heart is acting up again and she doesn't want to take the bus. Mary sees Naomi and Elizabeth peeking through the double doors of the sanctuary. She smiles and waves them back inside. It takes so long to get away from church and it's worst on Easter Sunday morning.

Just when Harold is finally ready, is finally backing the black Plymouth out of the church parking lot, he remembers a book he promised to bring Pastor Johnson. He leaves the car running and hurries back into the church with his long key chain jangling and what should have been a minute takes ten. An urgent phone call from the hospital informs him that a baby in the premature incubator won't live longer than twenty-four hours. The mother says Harold married her six years ago. Surely Harold remembers. Could he come and baptize the baby? Harold says he'll come before the day is over. He's got his family waiting for him now, but he'll say a prayer over the telephone for the baby and for her.

In the car, the girls play "I Spy" while they wait. Sometimes getting away from church takes so long. "I'm hungry," says Elizabeth.

"We'll be there soon," Mary says, offering her a slightly flattened hot cross bun.

Harold takes the back roads to St. John's, the gravel ones, and even though he drives above the speed limit all the way, they are the last to arrive. St. John's, surrounded by corn fields and so small a congregation it has a service only once a month, is always chosen by the pastors in the Fox River District for their Easter afternoon potluck. On Easter all the pastors in the district come: the Johnsons and the Ingebritsons; the Ingrams and Spildes; the Egerdahls and Kundtsons; the Andersons (both Hans and Einar), the Laviks, Lundgrens, Tollefsons and Mary's family, the Styves.

The other pastors' cars - dusty, large and at least five years out of date - are parked in the gravel lot outside the white church when the Styves arrive. Harold skids to a stop and rolls down the window of his black Plymouth. "Did you keep on preaching till they all walked out?" calls Lundgren.

"I suppose you really believe that the last shall be first," says Egerdahl. Harold laughs as the men walk closer and gather around his car. He can't even get out the door.

Mary and the children slide out the other side. Mary stretches. Easter should be celebrated here in the middle of the flat fields, she thinks, away from stained glass and embroidered paraments, from carved wooden pews and an organ introducing every hymn. Out here the window of the sky is stained with tinted cloud and the church yard is embroidered with yellow daffodils; out here cemetery stones congregate and silence is the song of praise. She would come here every Sunday if she weren't the pastor's wife and expected to be helping Harold or singing in the choir or greeting people at the door. Mary turns her face to the wind and hears the supplicating echo of Rebecca's hymn: "Breathe thy loving spirit into every troubled breast".

Mary walks towards the cemetery, away from the high white spire. She stumbles in the bracken, watches her stocking separate and feels unexpected tears rise to her eyes. She sits down for a moment in the grass surrounding the stones. She'll talk to one of the women today. To Anna maybe, she'd understand. Or Ida. *They* wouldn't tell the others, or the men, or anyone in her congregation - and if they prayed for her it would be in silence and not aloud, in public.

Harold has hardly slept since Lent began, even on the settee in his study where, when he does take a nap, he lies down with his shoes on. He's too busy to sleep, he says. He's trying to get something done, he says. What, Mary asks. "Something," Harold says over his shoulder. "Something important." He doesn't eat his meals with the family either. He buys bags of food and takes them in through the side door marked "Pastor's Study". Empty pop bottles line the window sill and bags of potato chips litter the floor; apples lie half-eaten on the desk. Two Revere tape recorders mark the center of the floor and bits of spliced tape lie in piles.

Mary hopes no one will come to the parsonage until this is over. Whatever 'this' is. She tried to tidy up once when Harold was out, but when he came back he said she was to touch nothing. In fact she was to stay out of the study until he was done. "Done with what?" He didn't answer.

First she thought he was practicing sermons. Why else would he say the same thing over and over: "The Lord our God The Lord our God." But one line is hardly a sermon. Once in the middle of the night she heard "The Lord" spoken so loudly she thought Harold was there next to her, shouting in his sleep. She ran down the hall in her nightie and opened the door a crack. He was standing in front of the mirror with his shoulders back, whispering "the, the, the, the" at the mirror until his breath ran out. When he inhaled again she heard "Lord, Lord" repeated as many times as his breath would hold.

Wide-eyed, Mary went back to bed.

Later in the week she heard Harold rehearsing "And Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." He sang the words in a high tenor and then in an operatic baritone. She heard him hiss the words and then say them backwards: "Heart thy all with thy Lord the love shalt Thou." He marched up and down the study giving the words in pairs: "AndThou shaltlove theLord thyGod withall thyheart." And then "AndThoushaltlove theLordthyGod withallthyheart."

At night she lay awake and pondered Harold's behaviour. When she asked if he was feeling all right he snapped at her, "Of course. I've never felt better." Mary didn't feel all right. She felt worried and so alone. Who did she have to talk to? Lena Anderson was a nurse, and kind, but she was president of the Ladies Aid and she might pray for Harold at one of their meetings. Dr. Larson, the only doctor in town, was also chairman of the Board of Deacons. She couldn't talk to anyone in the church. Today she'd talk to one of the women.

Mary watches her girls run to meet their friends, then fall back hesitating. The children eye each other warily. Meeting only once a year means sometimes they didn't recognize each other. The girls run to the choir room to change from their yellow organdy dresses and patent leather shoes. In a minute they appear again, dressed for play in cotton skirts and warm Norwegian sweaters.

"I need help," Elizabeth says, running towards her.

"I'll make a double knot for you," Mary says, stooping to tie up Elizabeth's oxfords. "Now it won't come undone."

She watches Elizabeth run to join the races. "Race you to the outhouse. Race you to the Johnson gravestone. Race you around the church three times." By the time the children fall in the grass exhausted, all of them are friends again.

On Maundy Thursday everything had blown up. Harold was at the church helping Jake prepare for communion. Jake had twice forgotten to do the trays and people were complaining. Mary marched into his study, swept up the crumbs, gathered the litter and emptied the garbage. Two Revere recorders stood in the middle of the floor. When she finished she stared at the reels, for once silent and motionless. She pushed the first button. The reels moved but no sound came out. She turned the volume up. No Harold. No voice of the Lord. No words. She watched, mesmerized by the movement. "In remembrance," she whispered. "This do in remembrance," she said aloud. "In remembrance of _me_," she said, as if she were beginning a sermon, and then crying she left the room, and the slowly turning reels of tape.

"You've erased it," Harold shouted at her Good Friday morning. "It's gone. You erased every word. You've removed weeks of work. Destroyed. I'll never get another one ready in time. 'Remembrance'! I'll remember, how can I forget?"

She hadn't asked 'in time for what'? She hadn't answered. She'd gone to the Good Friday service and stayed until she heard the seventh word spoken from the cross. "It is finished." And then she'd gone home early from the service.

Long before the recording began she had worried about Harold. About his forgetting to pray at the supper table. About finding him inert in a chair, staring blankly. About his clothes lying in a pile by the closet. About being silent for hours and then talking non-stop. And then the taping had begun. He was like a cracked windshield, Mary thought. Shattered, but not broken. Cracked by going too fast. By pressure at a weak point.

Mary walks slowly to the kitchen where the women are deciding whether to eat outside or in. They choose inside. It's easier to lay everything out on tables in the church basement. They are warming up casseroles and slicing ham, setting out jello laced with grated carrot, buttering homemade bread, and unpacking celery sticks which have sat in ice water since Easter sunrise services. Mary watches the women - energetic, cheerful and comfortable together. They touch each other's shoulders or hands and laugh easily, their words tumbling out as fast as 'hallellujah' syllables. "Mary, aren't you going to help?" She smiles. Of course she's going to help. But she doesn't. It was a paradise to be here, away from watching eyes and pain and need. Among friends. In the country air. She'll help with dishes, she says, and sits on the stoop until Rose Marie comes in her apron and hollers everybody in. No one needs calling twice.

Martha is asked to play the piano for grace, even though the oak upright is always out of tune. They agree on the doxology, "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow", but they forget to announce the ending and everyone smiles as they reach the last line. Half of them sing "May strengthened for Thy service be" and half sing "May feast in paradise with Thee". The children can't understand why their parents are laughing when they sing the 'Amen'. They certainly wouldn't be laughing if they were singing with their congregations.

Harold says he wants to sing "For life and health and every good we give Thee thanks, O Lord." It's such a beautiful round. Let's all sing it together, he says.

"Harold, the food's on the table - it won't stay hot," Mary whispers. He ignores her. Ida puts her hand over Mary's and smiles. They all understand Harold. Mary mustn't worry so. He divides the group into half and they sing "For life and health" three times. Everyone moves towards the tables but Harold says, "No, not so fast. Let's sing it children against the adults." So they sing the round again. Nobody minds. Rebecca is the oldest girl and she sings loudly so the little ones can follow her. Mary knows that once Harold gets going, he'll have another plan. Sure enough. Men against the women, he says. When they finish, the women say, "That's enough, Harold. We're not going to sing again for you."

So Harold sings it one last time himself, singing as he squeezes in beside Mary, singing as he shakes hands with Esther, singing as he pulls Anna's braids. He's not going to spoil their dinner by asking them to sing again, even if it is potluck and warmed up and served with bent silverware and thick white mugs. This is a feast, the Fox River Evangelical Lutheran Pastors' Easter Sunday Feast, and all of them here know it.

Today there is no hurry: no meetings to attend, no telephones to answer, no announcements of illness or accident or death. This is family time for the pastors and the children sit with their parents. At supper they can sit with their friends, but now they sit as families. They don't mind. It gives them a chance to look each other over. Lars Ingebritson has shot up. He's taller than his mother now. Erik Anderson is trying to grow a beard. Anne Louise has cut her braids. She used to have hair to her waist. The little ones sit wide-eyed and silent. But by suppertime they'll be streaked with sweat and dust, marked with grass stains on their knees and dirt beneath their fingernails, and they'll be giggling, barely able to eat.

When lunch is over the men sit on the back stoop together, saying little. All of them have conducted sunrise services and have preached two or even three times today and they are tired, for the moment, of words. Harold and Abe and Sivert go into the sanctuary for a nap. They lie back on the curved pews, use their jackets for pillows and soon are asleep. Abe's flat on his back with his hands folded over his chest. He could be in a coffin, he's so still. Harold has tucked his black shoes into the hymnal rack.

While the men sleep Einar comes in the sacristy door and enters the pulpit. Tomorrow is the deadline for sending tapes to Professor Abrams. He wants to practice once more before he makes his final recording tonight. His voice is so small. If only he had a rich baritone, or a loud bass. His is a tiny tenor, and sometimes people in his congregation say they can't hear him even with a mike. He sounds like an oboe, reedy and thin. God was sympathetic to Moses and gave him Aaron to speak the words. Maybe God would at least let him audition for the part. Einar drops his head and whispers his pulpit prayer, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight." He always thinks 'loud' instead of 'acceptable'. He's been doing that for sometime now, but it hasn't done much good. He wishes he had Harold Styve's confidence. The meek never inherit the earth, Einar thinks. They inherit the country churches, diminishing memberships, inadequate salaries, anonymity. The back seats, the outfield, the used cars, the second hand clothing. If he could at least audition. Surely sincerity counted for something.

Einar stretches his hands to the edge of the pulpit and takes three breaths, slow and deep. He closes his eyes and counts backwards from 10. He thinks: 'Voice of the Lord. Loud. Authoritative. Severe. Forgiving. Kind. Tolerant of timidity.

"I am the Lord Thy God," Einar bellows. It sounded pretty good, he felt a tremor in the little church. "And thou shalt and thou shalt and thou shalt..." His voice has never sounded so rich.

He opens his eyes. Harold Styve was sitting right in front of him, rubbing his eyes! Where did he come from? The church was empty when he came in! He didn't want Harold to know he was practicing. Not Harold, with all his assurance. Einar runs out the altar door, his cheeks burning.

Grinning, Harold goes to the piano and thumps out the first chords of "Up from the grave He arose". Sivert and Abe lift their heads. "Are you two going to sleep all day? It's time for the games. Get up!"

The fathers organize games and rehearse the rules; relays, 3-legged races and a game of fly-ball with Harold batting and the children trying to earn a turn. They play freeze tag, "Last Couple Out" and "Three-Deep". The women have been doing dishes and haven't had a chance to nap or play. They say it's time for the Easter egg hunt and shepherd the children into the church where the mothers can rest and the children can catch their breath. "Sing," Mary says to the children. "Time will pass faster that way." The children do the motions to "Zachias was a little old man" and sing all six verses of "I have the joy, joy, joy down in my heart". When they finish, laughing, tears are running down Mary's face, but the fathers are calling and no one notices Mary's sorrow. She sits alone in the pew, listening to the children shouting outside the windows. She would like to stay in this country paradise and not return to Harold's avalanche of words.

When Mary joins the others on the stoop, the search has already begun. Bigger brothers and sisters help the younger ones. "There's one," Rebecca calls to Elizabeth. "You can have all the red ones and I'll take all the blue." Every time a child yells "I found one", half a dozen children converge as if another egg would appear on the same spot. It's not surprising: these children all believe in miracles.

When Mary sees chocolate eggs she knows that Harold brought them. Who else would splurge on store-bought candy? There are dozens of tinfoil-wrapped eggs hidden in the grass and even some jelly beans, unwrapped, lying in the carved letters of gravestones. "Did _you_ bring the chocolate eggs, Harold?" Mary calls. He doesn't answer her. Mary turns away.

When the children are finished, the eggs are counted. Peter Tollefson has found the most. His prize is a pack of rainbow pencils with a different Bible verse engraved on every color. All the chocolate eggs are dumped in a pile and everyone is given exactly the same number. Elizabeth doesn't think that's fair, but she doesn't say so, not with all the mothers and fathers standing around.

"Now the children," says Rebecca. "Let _us_ hide for you, Daddy." And Harold says of course and the adults go into the church basement where coffee is put on to boil in white enamel pots. The adults carry their cups while they hunt for the eggs and talk to each other so much the children have to remind them to look. Their baskets of eggs are left on the church steps and nobody counts who gathered the most. The children get out marbles and jacks. The adults refill coffee cups and wander into the cemetery where they sit with their backs against the smooth hot stones. Mary walks slowly from stone to stone, reading the dates and the markings: "The Lord was his Shepherd", "Gone to meet her God", "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord", "A child of the heavenly Father". The others, in dark slacks and cotton print dresses, lean against the stones and tell stories to each other. Three died in Ingram's church from a car accident on Highway 6. Karl has buried two infants, a week apart. Old Grandma Christiansen passed away in Decatur. She was 94 and the last of the Fox River settlers to go. What words do you speak for the dead. What do you say to the living?

Harold is lying on his back, chewing a piece of straw. He looks at his watch and shouts for the children. Who is going to help me ring the bell? Come on children, where are you? His voice echoes across the graveyard. The children are playing hide and seek but they appear in the twinkling of an eye. Harold swings himself up into the belfry, unties the worn rope and throws it down to Peter. "Line up according to your ages. Ring for five minutes, or until your arm gets tired."

The other adults lie in the cemetery and listen to the uneven and incessant ringing. The children wait outside the church, their heads thrown back to watch the bell swinging from the high church spire. Harold holds the little ones up and helps each one pull the heavy rope. "He's so good with the children," Anna says to Mary. "Your Harold, I mean. It wouldn't be any fun on Easter if Harold wasn't here."

Mary doesn't answer her. She's pulling petals from a daisy.

"Anna," she says. "Do you want to walk down the road a bit?" But as they set out Martha calls them to help fix supper and Anna says, "Let's walk after we've eaten, Mary. I haven't talked to you for ages and I really want to."

The children continue ringing while the women prepare supper. Creamed eggs on toast, devilled eggs, egg salad sandwiches. The women call each other by their first names - Ruth and Ida and Kristi, Karina and Dorothy, Mary and Thora. None of them is Mrs. here; they are nearly sisters, not the 'pastor's wife'. Like friends, they laugh together. They talk about how to keep their children quiet while directing choir on Sunday morning. Ruth says her three sat on the altar rail one Sunday when she was directing the choir and they wouldn't come down. Karina says she's been told her dress is too colorful, pastors' wives ought to wear grey or navy. Thora Spilde says she's been asked to dress more cheerfully. She wears navy, she says, to keep the signs of five young children from showing. Anna says navy won't keep the signs of her child from showing. When she got pregnant with the one she's carrying now, old Mrs. Arneson told her she ought to think about the implications. You should hear Anna say "the implications". She sounds like she just got off the boat. Mary wants to say that it isn't people in the congregation who are criticizing her. But she knows she never would. The women only talk in laughter today; it isn't the time to talk about pain.

When supper is finished, Martha opens the pump organ in the sanctuary and everyone gathers in the front pews for the singing. Rebecca sits on one side of Harold and Naomi on the other. Elizabeth sits on his lap. They never can sit next to their father in Sunday morning church. Rebecca hears Harold humming, "O Lord my God" and whispers "Sh-sh Daddy, not so loud."

Mary asks if any of the girls need to go to the outhouse. When they shake their heads she goes alone and long after the singing begins she comes back, her head down and her hands shoved into the pockets of her cardigan.

They start with "Beautiful Saviour" and Kristi sings the solo. She was soloist at Harmonia College last year and she sang for King Olav when the choir went to Norway. Her voice is a cultured pearl, luminescent, pure. "Fair are the meadows," she sings. "Robed in flowers of blooming spring."

"Sing it again, Kristi," whispers Harold when she's finished. She sings the descant at the end and makes every child's eyes widen: "He makes our sorrowing spirit sing." She reaches it, the high note, as if she were an angel hovering on the point of the church spire and could hold the note as long as time should last.

In the silence after she has finished Harold says every child and every adult should choose a hymn. Mary says every family, but Harold says no, there's time. It's Easter, and on Easter you sing. No one is in a hurry and they are comfortable - warm and fed. Martha can play them all. She doesn't need a hymnbook or a light. She plays by ear, the old pump organ wheezing but keeping up. It's her legs that will give out before the organ does. They sing "Lead on O King Eternal" and "Wake Awake for Night is Flying"; "My God How Wonderful Thou Art" and "Immortal Invisible God only Wise"; and "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah" just after "Crown Him with Many Crowns". They sing only one verse and none of them needs a hymnbook.

Harold chooses "Joy to the World" and all the children laugh. "And why should we sing that only at Christmas?" Harold asks. "It's good any time of the year." But the children say, "That's not fair! We didn't know you could choose Christmas songs!" So Rebecca, whose turn is next, chooses "Thy little ones dear Lord are we". Harold says Rebecca should sing the last verse alone:

> In Paradise our songs renew,
> And praise you as the angels do.

She has a lovely voice. Maybe she'll be soloist at Harmonia one day too.

Naomi asks for "I am so glad each Christmas Eve". They sing it first in Norwegian and then in English, all the verses each time. Elizabeth wants "Angels We have Heard on High". Look what Harold's started. Mary's turn is next. "Choose 'Silent Night', Mommy," her children say and Mary nods. When "Sleep in heavenly peace" echoes through the little church Mary's head is bowed and she is no longer singing.

Martha suggests some spirituals. She knows "Rock-a My Soul", "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "When the Saints go Marching In". When she starts "Saints", Harold marches all around the little church, the children following behind, up and down the aisles, back and forth through the pews. He gives each of the littlest children a turn on his shoulders.

When Martha calls out she can't pump another moment, they all gather around the altar, standing together to sing "Who is this host" and "Blest be the tie that binds". They always end with these two. It wouldn't be Easter, it wouldn't be right, if they didn't.

O blessed saints, now take your rest;
A thousand times shall you be blest.

Everyone joins hands for "Blest be the tie that binds". Anna puts an arm around Mary when she sees the tears in her eyes. They hadn't gotten to walk after all and now the day was over. Mary has been close to tears all day. What could be wrong?

Mothers hold the hands of their children or of each other. Some of the men have an arm across another's shoulder. The littlest children are sleeping in pews; Kjell is asleep on Einar's shoulder. Martha pumps slowly and plays so quietly the organ can hardly be heard at all.

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear

When they finish there is silence, a dark silence that slips into the sanctuary from across the black fields. What will the next year bring? What sorrow; what joy? Who in their congregations will join the Church Triumphant? How much comfort will they have to give, how many burdens bear?

"Look," says Rebecca, almost in a whisper. "The moon."

And above the edge of the earth slips a thin moon, its points curving upwards. It's a sign for the mizpah, everyone saying the familiar words together: "The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other."

In the silence after the benediction Harold moves towards the front. He lifts his hands, trying to stay the movement, to silence the voices. "Just a minute...just a minute. Not yet. We're not finished yet." Mary looks around nervously. It's so late for the families, even for Easter holiday it's late. "Harold," she says. "A minute, Mary," he says impatiently, in a hoarse whisper accompanied by a frown. But to the assembled friends, to the fellow pastors, to the children who so loved riding on Harold's shoulders, he smiles. "Let's hear once again the command our Lord gave us." Harold looks around the sanctuary and takes a deep breath. Mary can see his belly expand in front of him. He drops his shoulders. He blows out through his mouth. Kristina is crying; Thora and Ida sit down wearily in the front pew. Harold waits until it's completely quiet. "And Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," he begins and his hands lift just a little, as if in benediction. When Tommy calls out "I want to go home," Harold begins again, louder but just as slowly. "And

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul..." Elsie sleeping on Martha's shoulder begins to whimper. "and with all thy mind."

Einar looks at Harold in disbelief, his eyes wide. Rebecca is confused. This wasn't one of her father's normal benedictions.

Harold pauses, and though his body doesn't move a muscle, his eyes survey the group. "And thy neighbour as thyself." He coughs and repeats 'as thyself'. And then swiftly, he drops his hands, lowers his voice and closes his eyes. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." The 'Amen' is said in a chorus. Some of the children shout the 'amen' and some of the adults voice the word in a weary tired tone. The women say 'amen' with closed eyes, automatically. Anna repeats the syllable twice, her arm squeezing Mary each time. They should have had their talk. Mary has not been herself today.

When the lights in the church go on, the silence is broken by laughter and hugging and shaking hands. The little congregation prepares to disperse, blessed and fed and restored.

Sleepy children are swept up, dishes are collected from the kitchen and clothes are gathered together in bundles. Cars backing out of the gate go in twelve different directions home.

"You drive," says Harold to Mary as they walk to the car. He still has the hospital to visit tonight. So Mary puts the girls in the front seat with her. Elizabeth rests her head on her mother's lap and Naomi leans against Rebecca who watches the road with her mother.

And their father, who was up at five for Easter sunrise service, stretches out in the back seat of the black Plymouth while Mary, his wife, drives slowly into the dark silence of the Easter Sunday night.

GOOD FRIDAY

Rebecca was the eldest, the first-born, she had the longest braids.

On Saturday nights Mary washed her girls' long blond hair and wound the wet strands around metal rollers that circled the girls' heads like haloes of tin. On Sunday mornings, before even the paper boy got up, she twisted dozens of ringlets on her finger. Later in the week, when all the ringlets were limp, she braided the fine hair into six French plaits which were meant to last until the next Saturday night.

Mary was tired of doing the girls' hair.

One hot summer Saturday when Harold was at the Lutherdale Bible Camp Board Meeting, Mary washed the girls' hair. Each girl lay on the kitchen cupboard in her shorts and without a shirt while Mary wet and shampooed and scrubbed and vinegar-rinsed their hair. She usually did one girl each Saturday night, but she did them all on that Saturday afternoon, and her silence was like a towel wrapped around them. Rebecca first, then Naomi and last Elizabeth.

Then she sat them in the sun and combed the snarls out of their hair before she braided six long heavy plaits and sat them on the red velvet bench where people kneeled to take their vows when Harold married them in the parsonage living room. Underneath the velvet, on the back of the pine plank, were the signatures of hundreds of couples who had signed their names as one.

The girls sat in the sun with their backs facing the camera. The bench was wide enough for all three of them. They were dressed in identical sundresses, frocks bought from Sears in sizes too large for this season but just right for next. The dresses were bordered by ruffles at the shoulder and lace around the hem.

Elizabeth was the youngest and wore that style dress for half a dozen years.

Then Mary snapped the picture and cut off their braids. She cut each braid off just below the ear, washed the kinks out of the hair remaining and took the girls to the barber shop next to the bowling alley for a trim. When they got home she wrapped the pristine braids in white tissue paper and tucked them in the bottom of the cedar chest which Harold had given her long before he married her.

No one has touched or seen or wanted to see the braids since. There they sit: six chunks of blond braided hair. Rebecca's are the longest. That's the only way you can tell them apart.

Naomi thought their mother should have photographed them in their Sunday curls, cut off each ringlet one by one, and saved *them* in the box.

Elizabeth thought her mother never should have cut their braids at all. Or never have saved them when she did.

Just put your foot on the brake, Rebecca. Hold it steady! That's not so difficult, is it? To ask you to keep your foot on the brake? Hold still. Don't move. If you lift your foot off the brake, you'll end up in Lake Crescent. How would you like that? So hold it. Good.

Now reach over and open the front door for me. I don't want to drop these bottles. I've got my hands full, can't you see? Just reach your arm over. Stretch. Pull the handle back but keep your foot on the brake!

But she is only a child. When she reaches for the handle, her foot slips off the pedal. Her arm, her leg, her body — they are not long enough. The handbrake can't hold the loaded car alone. He's kept the engine running because the starter is acting up. It's in neutral of course. How do you keep an engine running in any other gear?

The car begins to roll backwards at a slow pace, then a rush. "Daddy!" she is screaming, fainter every moment.

"Daddy!"

The black Plymouth, in flight over the brow of the hill, careens against a telephone pole, crosses the street, bounces off a parked car, and twists down the hill until it straightens itself out. Then, like a skier ready for the jump, the car aims for the barricade at the bottom of the second hill, hits it squarely at more than 80 miles an hour they told him later, and rises slightly before dropping 100 feet into the oily waters of

Lake Crescent.

It was a week before they dug her up, her feet and hands and body pressed against the pedals.

When Mary in the kitchen heard Rebecca's scream she shoved both hands through the breaking kitchen window. She screamed Rebecca's name, screamed the jagged glass, screamed the sudden blood, screamed the ripped skin, screamed the disappearing body of her eldest drowning daughter.

When Harold on the pavement heard Rebecca's scream he dropped the box of empty soda bottles and not a single one of them got broken.

Mary had a special slip made for Rebecca: a rubber panel lined with eggshell satin to hang inside her skirt, to tie around her waist and cover her across the back. Rebecca wore it once a month. Even though she changed often it was always stained with blood. A heavy flow. Mary should have made the slip of sponge. So much blood.

Mary never told Rebecca that blood is Life: that Thor reached the land of enlightenment by bathing in the menstrual blood of the Primal Matriarchs; that Odin acquired supremacy by drinking 'wise blood' from the cauldron in the womb of Mother Earth; that Celtic kings became gods by drinking 'red mead' dispensed by the Faery Queen; that Taoists sought immortality by absorbing menstrual blood; that Egyptian pharaohs became divine by ingesting the blood of Isis.

Mary never told Rebecca that according to the Talmud, the Bible and the Holy Christian Church, blood is Unclean, a Curse: a menstruous woman's touch could sour wine, cloud mirrors, rust iron, blunt the edges of knives.

Destroy a man's vitality.

Mary couldn't tell Rebecca what she didn't know herself.

In the seventh century the Bishop of Canterbury forbade menstruating women to take communion. In the thirteenth, the Church forbade men to touch a menstruating woman and in the seventeenth century women in their 'fluxes' had to remain outside the church door.

At midnight in the middle of the month Mary wakes Rebecca up to help her change. She lines her bed with rubber sheets. So much blood. Rebecca wears navy skirts for a week, or black, or brown. Never colored cotton prints. Never white crisp linen. Never full-skirted pastel dresses.

Rebecca cried of cramp. She was only twelve when she first began to bleed. And the cycle began not once every long month but every twenty-seven days.

Mary never told Rebecca anything. Just showed Rebecca how to keep the blood from pouring down her leg, hovered over her with clean fresh underthings and sympathy, and watched Rebecca's pale face soften as she slept.

At twelve years old such a rich and rare excess of Blood.

Of Life.

At the campground it is getting dark. Above the towering Douglas firs the early signs of night appear: a solitary star, a brush of purple, shadows in the forest's night.

Harold has put up the tent, an army surplus cook tent. Three pegs are missing and there is a large hole above the far end. Mary has been eyeing it with some unease. Don't worry about it, he says, you have all the rest of the tent over you. Some people even sleep under the stars. What's one tiny hole? She says, if it rains the whole tent will be wet. He says, trust you to expect it to rain. I bet you even wish it would. She stops talking to him with a tight-lipped turn of her head.

A small bear comes through the campground and Mary runs to put all the food in the trunk. He says leave it be, these are only black bear, they're not grizzlies. They won't hurt anyone. She says if they are hungry they certainly would. He asks for the camera and tells the children to go over near the bear. She sucks in her breath. Harold! But the bear ambles off before he gets them posed.

No, he isn't worried about the bears. But he is irritated by the lantern. It doesn't pump properly. It won't light. He is working at the picnic table and has poured kerosene into the opening of the lantern. It won't matter if a little spills. They are outdoors. Why worry? He pumps and pumps but he can't light the lantern and pump at the same time. He won't ask Mary to help. She would give him so much advice: why didn't we get a new one, who is this borrowed from anyway, have we damaged it while travelling, couldn't we just go and buy one at the ranger station store, I need one in order to cook. If we always stop so late how can I get the children ready for bed and the supper made at the same time and in the dark with bears skulking around, it's dangerous. Why do we have to set up camp in the dark? The children have counted forty-two bears today. They're _everywhere_. Just because they're small doesn't mean they're not dangerous. They're attracted to food and if we can't see them coming in the dark how do I know when to serve supper?

No, he won't ask Mary. She is like a bee buzzing in his ear or a sparkler sizzling in the dark. All he needs is a little help in pumping here. He calls for Rebecca. She is the oldest and she will come. Just push this in and out, he says, his voice soft and coaxing. No (irritated) _here_. Now, there you have it (coaxing and kind again).

Rebecca is sitting at the picnic table where he has been filling the lantern. She pushes faithfully in and out even though she hears her mother saying, "Harold, it's dangerous, please don't have her help you. Couldn't we go to a motel tonight?" Her voice is coaxing too.

Rebecca is pumping as hard as she can, but she forgets to steady the lantern and while she is pumping the lantern slowly slides towards her and falls into her lap with a crash. One of the glass panes breaks. Harold doesn't swear. He doesn't even speak. But he is so brittle you think he might explode. He

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grabs the kerosene can, splashes it all over the damp kindling in the fireplace and tells Rebecca to bring the matches.

He is quick enough to jump back from the explosion, but when Rebecca moves, she crashes into the picnic table and is pinioned there against the wood. Before Harold can recover himself, her blue dress, her blond curls, her nylon jacket, her cotton stockings have ignited into a great blossoming flame.

Rebecca played the flute. She played it well. She played it because Mary wanted her to.

Mary loved the flute. She said it was the most melancholy sound in the world, the most honest sound you could make.

Mary bought Rebecca a new flute. She could have rented one from the school; she could have bought one, second-hand. But Mary bought a new one without consulting Harold who never would have given his approval. Mary polished it until it shone and showed Rebecca how to hold it, like that. How to clean it carefully before putting it back in the red velvet center of the case.

But Mary hadn't counted on the fever blisters. Year after year when contest weekend came, Rebecca broke out with clear blisters along her lips. They spread like lightning and soon covered her entire mouth. How can you play a flute when your mouth is covered with blisters?

They tried calomine lotion and zinc oxide, ointments and creams, vitamins and spray. The blisters remained; they multiplied. They came three days before contest and hardened into scars by the weekend after. Everyone else went on the band bus to Carmel. Rebecca stayed home.

What sort of miracle could dry and heal those blisters? Rebecca felt so guilty. Why couldn't her body behave?

That night they go see Niagara Falls. Above the Falls is a fence to keep people from wandering off the edge while they eye the spray, admire the sight, adjust their awe. This fence is low and easily ignored. It is made of metal and adds nothing to the beauty of the site.

Harold wants to get to the edge, beyond the fence. How else can he see the water boiling down below? It's safe, he says. I'm not going to jump, I'm not going to slip, I'm not going to fall. Of course it's safe. They put the fence there as a warning, not as a necessity. It's absolutely safe.

And he pushes against it with his foot. See? Solid as the granite they are standing on. "I want to see the Maid of the Mist. She's just going under the Falls."

"No, you mustn't." Mary is sucking in her breath. Is she angry or afraid? Is he oblivious or deliberate? "Come, Rebecca," he says in a honey-coated voice. "Let's just see if we can see her. Look for yellow raincoats, everyone has to wear one. We can see them if we move just over there. They have to pay twenty dollars to take that trip. We can get just as good a view from here."

"No, Daddy. I don't want to go." He is already walking down the black granite. "Come on," he is saying. "Follow me, Rebecca."

Elizabeth is holding her breath. Naomi is crying. "Harold! No! Don't!" Mary says.

He insists there is a ledge below the granite rock."Do you think they would have such a small fence so close to the actual edge?" Of course not.

"Come on," he insists, ordering Rebecca to follow. She does, without looking back at Mary. "It's safe. There are boulders here. Who is going to slide over the edge if there are boulders edging the cliff?"

Rebecca is bending towards him with her body, her right hand tightly in his. They move towards the yawning hole of sky above the falls of Niagara, two small creatures creeping along the edge.

Without warning, Rebecca's sneaker slips. Her body bends towards the black chasm. Harold is thrown off balance. He loses his hold. He leans frantically after her.

But she is gone.

There is no grassy verge, no boulders to catch her, nothing but an uninterrupted fall to the bed of water below. Along Niagara Falls she fell, a small maid plummetting, into the mist.

That night the spray glittered and the water lay as soft and dark as velvet.

Mary and Harold are going to the District Luther League Convention. Mary is to give the greeting from the Lutheran Church Women at the opening session tonight. They are late in setting off. Some trouble with the radiator. Harold has been under the car since dawn. There is no garage in this town, no spare parts, no hoist. Harold can fix it himself. Why is Mary worried? Of course, they'll get there. Sooner or later.

On the way, they'll leave Rebecca in Marah. Aunt Margaret is babysitting her. Rebecca's little bag is packed: a white lamb, her flannel nightie and blue robe, her toothbrush, and a copy of Winnie the Pooh. Mary has fixed tuna fish sandwiches and a thermos of tea for lunch. It is 6 p.m. when they leave. Rebecca falls asleep in the backseat before they reach Marah. "I've already missed the opening session," Mary says. "Couldn't we stay the night in Marah?"

"You can," Harold says. "I'm going to Grand Forks."

When they get to Margaret's, Harold leaves the car running. He says they don't have time to eat even though the table is set for four. He kisses Rebecca goodbye, tossing her up in the air.

She follows him down the stairs:

"Daddy, I wish I could go with you."

"Daddy, I'll be quiet in the sessions."

"Daddy, I don't want to stay with Aunt Margaret. Lamb and I won't be any trouble. Isn't there room enough for us?"

Twenty miles out of Marah, heading north at nearly ninety miles an hour, Harold slows down and does a U-turn on the highway. He says he's going back for Rebecca. "Can't we stay the night at Margaret's then?" begs Mary. He pounds on the door of Margaret's apartment and tells her to get Rebecca. Rebecca's going to come along with them. She's probably too much trouble, Margaret. You're not used to children. "Hurry, Margaret! We're trying to get there before midnight. We haven't got much time."

In the car, Rebecca's smile is so large, so satisfied, you can see it even after she falls asleep against Mary's discouraged and tired body.

Rebecca is sleeping in the back seat of the black Plymouth in what little room is left beside the sleeping bags and the boxes. Naomi and Elizabeth are curled against Mary's lap in the front. Harold is driving. They have been on the road since 6 a.m. They haven't stopped to eat or rest. Mary has brought bread and cheese. She has fed them in the car as they drove. Elizabeth has asked for a drink. She is so thirsty and her throat is dry. The bottle Mary brought was emptied long ago. Harold has said they have no time to stop. They have to get home. He has to preach tomorrow. Doesn't anyone remember that? Can't Elizabeth wait until they get home? Why didn't Mary bring a bottle of something to drink?

Elizabeth whispers to her mother, "I have to pee. I can't help it. I have to go. Now." She doesn't want her father to hear, but he does and stops instantly along the side of the road. The car skids on the ice, gravel spinning from the sliding wheels. He opens the door and insists she hurry, insists she go right there along the verge where even though it's dark every passing car could see her. "No one will see," he says. "There are so few cars on the road this late at night." He says it doesn't matter if she doesn't have any paper to wipe herself, her panties will catch the drips. They'll be home soon - if people would quit making him stop that is - and then she can have a bath and go to bed. They have to hurry, doesn't she remember?

"Now I don't have to go," says Elizabeth and Harold says, "Oh yes you do. You said you had to go. Now go." Elizabeth is so cold by the car, her bottom bare in the wind. She can hardly pee for shivering. She is crying when she returns to Mary's lap. Her mother wipes Elizabeth's tears with her hair. Mary has given up trying to make things better. She just hopes they'll be home soon. It is so cold in the car and she is so tired. When it is warm enough for Rebecca in the back seat it is too hot in front; when it is just right in the front, Rebecca says she is shivering. Harold finally turns the heat off completely. He is so tired of hearing them complain. He says Mary should have brought extra blankets and pillows. Mary says she didn't know the heater wasn't working properly. "Not working properly!" Harold shouts. "Of course it's working. It just won't heat the front and the back seat at the same time."

No one is talking now. Naomi is asleep and so is Rebecca. Elizabeth watches the headlights cut through the black forbidding night. Her father is going very fast. He's been going fast all day, but now it's even faster. Up ahead Elizabeth can see tiny red eyes. Surely a car wouldn't have that many lights. It is a truck. She can see it now, lumbering slowly along the road. Her father is going to pass the truck. He swings into the other lane and accelerates as he does so. His shoulders and his head are leaning forwards towards the wheel, his eyes squint into the night. The road is curving as they finish overtaking. The white lights of an oncoming car break the darkness.

Harold makes it back into his lane long before the oncoming car swishes past them. But just as he relaxes behind the wheel, ice spins the car in a circle, swiftly and out of Harold's control, into the lane of oncoming traffic. The car stops perpendicular to the highway. The truck, sailing around the curve, cuts across the back of the stalled black Plymouth and crushes the back half of the Plymouth under its ten coordinated wheels.

When the news came, the most affluent member in the church said, "My bank account is yours. Take as much as you need. I know you don't have enough to pay for the travel and the investigation, the phone and the casket, the burial plot and the embalming - or shipping her body home. Take everything you need."

When the news came, her picture was put on the front page of the city newspaper and all the details, the ones anyone was sure about, were written there too. The faces of her two sisters and of her father and mother would have been on the front page as well, but Mary put her foot down, refused. Even a journalist wouldn't ignore the mother's wishes, though Harold said, "Sure, go right ahead."

When the news came Ida Ingebritson out in the Sudan telexed that the nurses' residence would be renamed in honour of Rebecca Styve; from India Maren Youngdahl wrote that the new orphanage would be named after Mary's daughter. Six babies born in the church that year were called Rebecca. To each of their mothers Mary sent a silver charm from Rebecca's quite modest collection, until all of them were gone.

When the news came Naomi was singing in the high school choir. They were practicing "Rock-a My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" for the spring concert. Elizabeth was learning how to make gathers on the home economics sewing machine. Her class was making dirndl skirts for the spring fashion show. Both girls were told to go to the main office, right away.

When the news came, Karen called and asked would Mary like her to play the flute for Rebecca's funeral. She could play "Sheep may safely graze", if Mary wanted her to, that is. Mary refused. "Thank you very much, Karen." But she refused. Harold said Karen should play. Mary said no, please, not that, not at the funeral, not on the flute.

But Harold said yes. Karen should play. Rebecca would have wanted her to. Karen was one of her best friends.

When the solo began Mary covered her ears and still heard every note.

EASTER SUNDAY

When the news came, Aunt Margaret was shovelling snow. She let the phone ring. Whoever was calling would call back. She didn't want to take her galoshes off before she finished shovelling. Probably it was some student complaining about an overdue book fine. Whoever was calling, however, wasn't going to call back. Aunt Margaret rested the shovel against the side door, wiped her feet on the mat, and tiptoed to the phone.

Clara and Minnie come on the train for the funeral. They are Rebecca's aunts too, Harold's sisters. They travel together and sit up all night. They don't want to pay for a berth. Aunt Margaret flies to Seattle. It's the first time she's ever taken a plane.

Naomi moves into Elizabeth's room from the room she shared with Rebecca. Clara and Minnie share the rollaway couch in the recreation room. Aunt Margaret sleeps in Rebecca's bed. She says she doesn't mind. How silly to think she'd mind sleeping in Rebecca's room. At night, when their mother is finally asleep, Elizabeth can hear Aunt Margaret moving around, emptying drawers, packing boxes, sorting through the closet. By the day of the funeral everything of Rebecca's is out of sight. Aunt Margaret said it should be that way. Elizabeth goes through the boxes when Aunt Margaret isn't looking. She finds the dried corsage of baby roses Bruce gave Rebecca for the church graduation banquet; she picks out Rebecca's white book of birthdays and her photograph album from Bible Camp; she slips the book "Growing up and Liking it" into the pages of the album; she takes the Evening in Paris perfume and the blue jar of Noxema. When she spreads the cool white cream on her cheeks she sees Rebecca facing her in the mirror.

Elizabeth's mother spends every day in her room, staring out the window or lying fully dressed on the carefully made bed or reading cards which come in sacks. There are more cards than come at Christmas. Almost every one of them includes a check. Mary says this money will be sent to the Lutheran orphanage in Bombay and the residence home in the Sudan. She writes the return addresses and the amount inside the cards, carefully tears the stamps off the envelopes, and piles the cards up, one by one.

Aunt Margaret brings Mary cups of tea and answers the phone. Clara and Minnie write thank you notes and play the piano. They play familiar hymns by ear, and sing along, alto and soprano. When they sing "I Lay my Sins on Jesus" and "When Peace Like a River", Elizabeth imagines bodies clasped together in a tight embrace, paralyzed in time.

Clara keeps a diary. Later, she says, Mary will want to know. Every day she asks Aunt Margaret how much came in the mail. Margaret pretends not to hear. Clara knocks on Mary's door and asks her. Margaret tells Clara she ought to be ashamed of asking Mary. Death is no time to talk about dollars and cents.

"The Tollefsons took in almost a thousand dollars," Clara says. "We'll have to stay an extra week to do the thank you notes." Margaret says no, there's plenty of help for that at the church. Clara has children to think of. She should go home as soon as possible.

Clara and Minnie take Mary shopping for a black dress. Clara says she's going to pay for it, but when one that suits Mary is found, Clara says she only meant to pay for half. Someone else could pay the other half, she says, or pay for the lingerie, she says, glancing at Minnie who is looking in the mirror and not at her. The dress is made of silk crepe and has long sleeves with buttons at the wrist and pin tucks across the bust. Mary looks just right in it, not so flat, Minnie says in a whisper. Not so apologetic, Clara says, and not in a whisper. Mary says the sleeves are see-through and what would people think. Clara says worrying about what people think should be buried with the dead and leads Mary towards the lingerie counter. Clara gathers a pile of slippery black garments but Mary says she doesn't need padded support or see-through lace cups or embroidered red roses or spaghetti straps and she isn't paying a penny for panties that don't come up to her waist. She chooses a set of black cotton jersey - "to keep the dress from sticking to me, static you know." Clara shrugs her shoulders and says, "Well, I wouldn't want cotton next to my skin if I could have silk, but you choose what you like, Mary. Minnie will pay for silk if you want it."

Elizabeth says she doesn't want to go to the funeral. Please. Would it be all right if she stayed home? She will think about Rebecca all the time. She will sit in Rebecca's room, not even read. She doesn't mind being alone, no one will have to stay with her.

The Aunts say no. That would not be all right. Rebecca is in heaven and Elizabeth should remember that. It's a safe and beautiful place, our Eternal Home. Elizabeth knows she's also at the Erickson Funeral Home. Do they think she doesn't know? Rebecca's lying in a white casket and can't be looked at. Not even by her mother. That isn't any secret, is it? Elizabeth doesn't want to go. Surely she wouldn't be missed and Rebecca, doesn't anyone understand, Rebecca wouldn't mind at all. Rebecca would probably tell her to stay at home, if she could.

The Aunts watch Elizabeth more closely after this. If only the body had been found sooner. A week was too long for anyone to wait for a funeral, particularly children. The Aunts have been so busy taking care of Mary and the house. Clara says she'll take Elizabeth to a movie but Mary says absolutely not, Elizabeth doesn't go to movies, so Clara makes sugar cookies with her instead. Minnie offers to read aloud from Little Women.

Aunt Margaret doesn't do anything with or for Elizabeth. She says Elizabeth should make herself useful - that always makes a person feel better. Aunt Margaret gives Elizabeth the sympathy cards to paste in a scrapbook. "Only use the ones with a Bible verse in them," Aunt Margaret says. "The rest of them you can throw out." Elizabeth doesn't open the cards, doesn't care what they say, doesn't care who sent them. She doesn't check for excerpts of Bible verses. She puts them all in the scrapbook with strips of scotch tape sealing every edge. She does dozens. She wants to seal all the words inside. She wants silence. Aunt Margaret says 'how stupid' when she sees the scrapbook that night. "You certainly aren't going to be allowed to do that anymore." Elizabeth is glad. She hates the cards. She's afraid they'll keep coming forever. Room after room will fill up. Her family will be buried by printed paper words, suffocated by limp bouquets of pastel flowers, strangled by sympathetic signatures. Elizabeth slides handfuls inside her cardigan and stuffs them under the mattress of Rebecca's bed. When Aunt Margaret makes the bed the night before the funeral, they all slide out, an avalanche unto the floor. Margaret knows how they got there. She will have a word with Elizabeth. Later. Things are difficult enough without Elizabeth acting up.

The Aunts tell Naomi and Elizabeth to wear their best dresses for the funeral. Children don't need to wear black. Last year's Easter dresses will do. Elizabeth can wear the navy blue cotton with white lace down the center, all the way to the hem. Naomi should wear her turquoise dress with the white pique bolero. Both of them have black patent shoes. The Aunts approve. No, the girls don't need to wear the white gloves or straw hats they wore on Easter Sunday.

When the food starts coming, Clara and Minnie take charge of the kitchen. They laugh a lot together, more than they should, Elizabeth thinks, staring out the window at the rain. They talk about feeding the crews on the farm during threshing time and about the snowstorm that left them stranded for three weeks in the winter of '21. They talk about the death of their mother's youngest child and about how she nearly died as well. Sometimes they talk in whispers, like about Aunt Evelyn and her new job in the creamery. If Harold calls, they say Mary is sleeping. After he calls they always whisper, so energetically Elizabeth thinks they're hissing.

Clara makes potato krub and Minnie makes a dozen loaves of white bread and a pan of cinnamon rolls. They buy two extra bread tins since Mary doesn't have enough. Clara tells Mary they didn't pay for them out of the food money: the tins are a gift for her, she doesn't have to pay them back. At least not right away. They chat with the people who bring food to the back door, longer than it takes to say 'thank you' thinks Elizabeth who has been sitting in the living room, reading or pretending to read, since Rebecca died. Clara and Minnie put adhesive tape on each of the dishes so that the owners can claim them later. They pack into the refrigerator (really too small for all the serving Mary does, or should do, Clara says) cold legs of roast chicken, potato salad, meat loaves and meat balls, cold tuna salad, sliced ham, congo bars, fruit soup, smoked salmon and even cold Swedish pancakes from Olga Olson. "Just heat them up," says Olga when she leaves them in a covered pie plate. "I've already sugared and buttered them. It's Mary's favorite breakfast, poor thing. Tell her I made them just for her. I even used her recipe from the church cookbook." When Clara and Minnie invite Olga to stay for coffee, she does, and the whispering starts again. "Whenever is he coming back?" Elizabeth hears Olga say. "You'd think he'd be here by now."

Clara and Minnie don't have to cook a thing. Sometimes they stand by the fridge and say, "Now what should we have tonight? You name it, we've got it." Elizabeth isn't ever hungry and hasn't asked for anything. She thinks the Aunts are entirely too, well jovial. Is that the right word? No different than when they visit in the summer. She and Naomi offer to help with the dishes (Mary has told them to be good girls, to help), but Clara and Minnie say no, they'll manage. The girls, poor darlings, mustn't worry about a thing. That's why they came out, Clara and Minnie say, to help.

None of the children in the neighborhood talk to Naomi or Elizabeth. They don't know what to say. Naomi and Elizabeth don't know what to say either, or do. They read books. Naomi is reading Grace Livingston Hill and Elizabeth is reading Nancy Drew though she isn't sure she should. The funeral will be on Tuesday afternoon.

Harold has ordered Rebecca's picture to be enlarged and placed on top the casket. The picture was taken in black and white, but the photographer is going to tint it. Make it nice, he says. He'll put blue in her eyes and pink, just a little, on her cheeks and even on her lips. No, of course it won't look like she's wearing lipstick. Gold for her hair and royal blue for the sweater she wore. She'll look just like you want to remember her, he tells Mary. Leave it to me.

Mary has no intention of having Rebecca's painted picture displayed on the casket. She looks at the photographer in silence. He is going to make Rebecca's memory right for her?

Mary tells Margaret that she wants singing at the funeral, many hymns, all the verses. She asks Margaret to bring her the red hymnal and begins writing down titles: "O Happy Day When We Shall Stand" and "I Know of a Sleep in Jesus' Name"; "O Day Full of Grace" and "For All the Saints"; "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" and "Children of the Heavenly Father". Margaret brings the list out to the living room where Clara and Minnie have sat down on the sofa, just to catch their breath. "These are far too many hymns," Aunt Margaret says in her tolerant but entirely disapproving tone. "Why does she have to sing all these? She should have the service as short as possible. Don't you agree?"

Clara and Minnie say Mary has the right to choose, whatever she wants. Let her sing the whole book if she wants to. Why should Margaret say a word? Margaret throws up her hands. Mary comes out then, the first time she has left her room. She stands like a shadow beside the dining room table. "And I want the offertory sung," she says, almost in a whisper. "Put that down as well, Margaret." Margaret starts to speak, but Clara rushes to put her arm around Mary. "Of course we'll sing the offertory, Mary. Whatever you say. Whatever you want. Just let us know. Why the Bergstrom family even had someone play 'Bury me not on the lone prairie' on the guitar. It's your funeral, Mary, you do what you want."

"Clara," Minnie hisses.

"As if anyone cares what the Bergstroms did," Margaret mutters.

Mary looks at the three of them as if they haven't spoken. "And I don't want Harold to speak. He says he's going to 'give a little greeting', just a few words. Tell him not to, please. Maybe he'll listen to one of you."

Clara leads Mary back to her room. Soothing words and large hands settle Mary down to sleep. Margaret and Minnie and Clara all agree to talk to Harold, one by one. The very idea, 'give a little greeting'. Indeed.

The Erickson Funeral Home sends three black cars on the day of the funeral. Everyone is waiting in the living room and has been since noon. Elizabeth and Naomi are sitting side by side on the black piano bench. When Elizabeth leans back she strikes a dissonant chord on the keys and everyone stirs as if they have received a shock. Aunt Margaret comes over and puts the cover down over the keys. "Now you won't need to do that again," she says.

No one has seen Harold since he went to the drugstore. When Mr. Erickson rings the doorbell to collect the mourners, Mary says to Margaret, "Ask him to sit down. Tell him Harold will be here soon."

"We've got no guarantee of that," Margaret mutters. But Mr. Erickson says he'll wait in the car and he'll let the other drivers know. There's no hurry. "Tell the Pastor's wife we're used to waiting," he says to Margaret, and then wishes that he hadn't. Margaret doesn't tell her anything.

At ten to one Harold stomps into the kitchen. When Margaret goes out to tell him everyone is waiting, she sees him emptying a paper bag onto the table, dumping out rolls of film and packages of flashbulbs. "Ask Mary where the Brownie and the Instamatic are," he says to Margaret, unbuttoning his coat and flinging it over a chair. "We haven't much time. Hurry, Margaret."

Margaret sweeps the packages off the table with one hand and passes Harold his coat with the other. "You come this instant, Harold Styve. Mary wants no pictures and you know it. Why do you go against her?"

"And what about what I want?" Harold retorts. "I'll make my own way to the church. Tell the others to go ahead." Margaret doesn't repeat a word of this in the living room. She doesn't need to, every word was heard.

They file out to the cars in silence, Mary holding tight to Elizabeth and Naomi's hands. "My husband is coming later," Mary says to Mr. Erickson. "Of course," he says. "I understand. Pastor Styve always has so much to do. It's a busy job he's got, we know. Not like ours at all."

Rebecca's uncles, Soren and Paul, take the service.

Everyone who has ever sung in the church choir is asked to sing. They are rehearsing "O Rest in the Lord". Harold has asked for the "Hallelujah Chorus". Mary doesn't know this. She wouldn't want it. She has asked for the "Nunc Dimittis" to be sung just before the casket, before Rebecca, is carried out: "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace."

No one is prepared for the crowd that comes. Every seat in the sanctuary is taken half an hour before the service begins. Not a sound can be heard in the church as Elizabeth's Uncle Soren reads slowly and with great deliberation:

> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
> Shall tribulation or distress or persecution
> or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?

The words roll out like soft beats of a drum. Elizabeth can feel the rhythm pounding in her ear. Her cousin is next. He walks slowly to the front.

> Let not your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house are many mansions; I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself.

Everyone is sitting in utter silence. Where did they get so calm, so still? Elizabeth wants to punch someone in the stomach and hear a wrenching scream. She holds her breath and hopes she'll pass out. She closes her eyes and pretends it's a dream. She clenches her fists and starts counting backwards from 1001.

Pastor Tollefson is in the pulpit now. "Suffer the little children to come unto me..." He can't finish the words. He stands staring at the page, not a sound in this church which seats four hundred, almost five hundred today. Elizabeth thinks everyone has stopped breathing, has died as well, has turned to stone. "...for of such is the Kingdom of God." When Pastor Tollefson comes down the steps he goes to Mary who is sitting in the front pew, kneels down in front of her, and takes her hands in his.

Dr. Bratvold, the District president, preaches. He says it is a witness to the Lord that so many fill his House and testify to the Eternal Life the Lord has provided to them that love Him. Elizabeth thought they were here because they loved Rebecca, not because they love the Lord. She cannot understand how everyone can talk and talk and talk. Isn't anyone else so sad and mad they want to scream? No one cries either. Words and words and words: your dear sister is with the Lord, underneath are the everlasting arms, unto the hills will I lift up my eyes, the Lord is our Shepherd. Don't people have anything else to say than borrowed words from the Bible? Why do they say anything at all?

When the sermon is finished the organist plays the opening notes of the offertory. At the sound of the offertory, people automatically get to their feet. Some of them sit down again hastily but others aren't even aware they have stood. The organist is sure she's made a mistake. But Dr. Bratvold motions everyone to stand. He nods to the organist and she increases the volume and the tempo with confidence. Everyone begins to sing and no one needs the hymnbooks which lie open in their hands:

> We give Thee but Thine own
> What e're that gift may be.
> All that we have is Thine alone
> A trust O Lord from Thee.

Dr. Bratvold has to motion the congregation to sit down when the words are finished. Everyone is stunned. Mary has remained seated while the congregation sang, her head down. When people begin to sit, occupied with smoothing coats and returning hymnbooks to the narrow racks, she swiftly moves to the closed white casket, stretches her arms from end to end and places her cheek for a moment, only a moment, against the patterned white velvet. She is back in her seat before anyone but Elizabeth sees her.

When the choir stands up in the balcony to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus" Elizabeth wants to leave, but she is wedged between Aunt Clara and Aunt Margaret. Her head is just a button between those two sets of strong broad shoulders. She bites her lip and lowers her head and wishes she had brought more tissues. The music is so loud that no one hears her crying. Bouncy and loud. Not at all right for Rebecca. When the choir comes to the sudden halt just before the final "Hallelujah", Elizabeth's high pizzicato sobs echo through the sanctuary. The long pause, the expectant gathering of acclamation before the final triumphant "Hallelujah" is ruined.

Aunt Margaret reaches for Elizabeth's hand and pulls Elizabeth behind her down the length of the pew. Elizabeth cannot see her face and doesn't want to. She can hear Aunt Margaret: "You should be ashamed of yourself. A big girl like you, crying when you know your sister is in Heaven. Disturbing the whole congregation. Calling attention to yourself. Whatever is the matter with you? Perhaps we _should_ have left you home."

Aunt Margaret marches Elizabeth down the center aisle, holding her hand in a vice. Just as they get to the exit, Elizabeth's father reaches the lectern. When Elizabeth glances back she can see his arms outstretched, his hands grasping the wide edge. He is looking slowly around the sanctuary. She hurries through the swinging door. "We'll get something to eat," Aunt Margaret says. Elizabeth looks up at her. She isn't cross!

In the church basement are tables of food: tuna sandwiches and ham buns and red jello and squares of chocolate cake. There will be hundreds to feed after the service at the cemetery. Elizabeth doesn't feel like eating but she doesn't dare tell Aunt Margaret. Around the tables stand dozens of women listening on loud speakers to the service upstairs, all of them in Hardanger aprons over dark dresses and big bosoms. Elizabeth can hear her father's tenor voice, resonant and pleading, a tentacle in the darkness, wrapping words around the people like a fraying rope. All the women are silent, listening to Elizabeth's father but looking at Elizabeth and Aunt Margaret. Aunt Margaret leaves Elizabeth by the coffee urn and moves over to the wall, behind the women, and leans down. In the sudden silencing of Harold's voice, Elizabeth hears her Aunt say loudly, "Now Elizabeth. Have anything you like. Sandwich? Cookie? Cake?" The women look for the loudspeaker cord while Elizabeth and Margaret, unobserved, select carefully from the platters. "Come," says Aunt Margaret. "Let's eat in the park. We'll have plenty of time before your father's finished."

Just as they go out the double doors at the back of the church Elizabeth hears her father asking everyone to stand and sing 'Den Store Hvide Flok' - first in Norwegian, then in English. "We told him that wouldn't be sung," she hears Aunt Margaret mutter. "We told him half a dozen times."

Elizabeth has no boots and it's been raining all morning. Aunt Margaret doesn't seem to notice. She finds a folded newspaper under a park bench and spreads it on the wet wood. A newspaper from under a city park bench to sit on? And Aunt Margaret touches it with her bare hands. Elizabeth feels better. But when she takes a bite of ham sandwich the food chokes in her throat. She runs to the garbage can to spit it up. Now Aunt Margaret really will be cross. But Aunt Margaret isn't. She just says, "That's all right. You don't feel like eating right now, do you?" and puts her arm around Elizabeth, not on her shoulder but behind her along the bench. "Look, if you're not hungry you can feed your sandwich to the squirrels" and Aunt Margaret begins to break off bits of sandwich and throw them on the ground. But it's not squirrels that come. Pigeons, huge flocks of scavenging pigeons, bald and sleek, flock around Elizabeth and Margaret's heads, flapping their wings, hopping up and down on the wet ground, intent, their beady unblinking eyes watching for bits of bread. They are entirely dependent on Elizabeth's whim. She throws small crumbs to the timid ones hovering on the edge until her plate is empty. And then she eats a cookie from Aunt Margaret's plate. Aunt Margaret hasn't said much. Just laughed as two pigeons argued over a crumb.

"Look, there's a white one over there," Aunt Margaret says.

"No, it's a sea gull, Aunt Margaret. We're not so far from the waterfront, you know."

And Aunt Margaret says, "They're beautiful, aren't they? The white ones, I mean." When Elizabeth looks at her she's sure Aunt Margaret has been crying too, or looks like any minute she's going to.

Elizabeth almost forgets why she's dressed up, sitting on a wet park bench, on a school day, and with Aunt Margaret who's never visited in the winter before. When the carillon begins to play "Amazing Grace" she and Aunt Margaret look towards the double doors where the white casket will appear. Long black cars are lining up in front of the wide church steps. The maroon brick of the church is washed in rain, dark and somber.

"Come. We have to go."

Elizabeth and Aunt Margaret ride in the third car, leading a long snake of cars to Evergreen Cemetery where Margaret holds Elizabeth's hand in her brown gloved one and will not let it go. They stand at the edge of the grave, surrounded by relatives and clergy friends, and listen to Uncle Paul:

> Forasmuch as it has pleased Almighty God of His great mercy, to take unto Himself the soul of our sister Rebecca...

No. No. No!

> we therefore commit her body to the ground...in sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

Stop! She won't be able to breathe! Stop! No!

Hundreds of people line up to shake hands. When they shake Elizabeth's hand, some of them say "God bless you" and "So you are Elizabeth" or "The peace of the Lord be with you". One of them even says, "You look just like Rebecca, you know. That's an honour, she was a such a fine Christian girl."

Others don't say a word. They take one of Elizabeth's hands in both of theirs or hug her clumsily or pat her on the head. The older ones shake their heads from side to side, mumble words Elizabeth can't hear, and gaze at her with tears in their eyes.

When Elizabeth sees Mrs. Gabrielson she is relieved. Mrs. Gabrielson's voice is low and clear. "Come see us sometime, Elizabeth. Soon. I'll be expecting you. Walk home with Joel from school. Stay for dinner with us." She takes Elizabeth's head in both her hands, looks intently at her for a moment, but doesn't say another word. Joel is behind her. He doesn't shake hands. "Don't worry about the work you're missing," he says. He blushes at the loudness of his voice and tries to lower it. "I've kept a list of all the assignments for you. I'll help you catch up." And then he grins and shuffles his feet. Elizabeth says thank you and takes his hand and shakes it which surprises both of them. Only adults shake hands. "I'm not coming back for another week or two," she says. "I'll be glad if you write things down for me."

Just when Elizabeth is ready to run through the cemetery stones as far away as she can Aunt Margaret says, "Come, the sun is finally out. Let's see if we can find the oldest gravestone in the cemetery. Follow me."

They slip away from the green awning and the long serpentine line of people moving towards her parents. Elizabeth follows Aunt Margaret to the oldest corner of the cemetery where there are more trees and smaller stones and where all the names are Norwegian and the dates go back to 1894. Aunt Margaret sits down on a damp granite stone. "These people had to believe 'Heaven was their home', Elizabeth. Do you understand? Their lives were hard, but better than dying from starvation in the old country."

"Joel Gabrielson's grandfather lived on the peninsula and rowed across the Sound to get their food, Aunt Margaret. Can you imagine rowing all the way across the Sound?"

They talk until only Harold and Mary are left near the open grave surrounded by white: gardenias and lilies of the valley and roses and carnations and gladiola and narcissus. Mary has asked that the first shovel be lifted only after everyone has gone. Aunt Margaret says "Come" to the others and they leave Harold and Mary huddled together under a single black umbrella held by Mr.

Erickson.

Minnie and Clara change to print polyester dresses and talk about who was there and how good everyone has been to Harold and Mary. Elizabeth sits in the chair nearest the piano and works on her spool knitting. She has knitted almost six feet since the news came. Naomi is on the telephone with one of her friends, planning where to meet tomorrow. Clara and Minnie play song after song, not hymns, but old favorites they used to play on the farm as duets. Funny songs, ones you could even dance to. Elizabeth asks them to sing "From this valley they say you are going" but after one line they look at each other and say they won't play the rest.

Margaret is frowning, wondering if anyone has arranged to have the flowers distributed to sick and shut-ins and where _were_ Harold and Mary? You couldn't stay by the grave forever. Mary'd catch her death of cold. What was Harold doing? Taking photographs? Filling the hole himself? Mary should be back in bed by now.

Aunt Margaret says Elizabeth should get her school things ready for tomorrow. Tomorrow? Elizabeth wants to listen to Clara and Minnie play the piano for the rest of the week, to stay home and keep her mother company when everyone left. She was top of her class. Why did she have to go back to school so soon?

But Aunt Margaret says that Mary and Harold are going to Vancouver to stay with Pastor Hansen and his wife for a few days. They have to get away. And Elizabeth has to go to school. "Go choose something from Rebecca's boxes," Aunt Margaret says. "Something new for going back to school, well new to you. Your mother thinks she's going to give away all Rebecca's things, but that's ridiculous. She can't afford to do that. Try on the turquoise cardigan. That would suit you. Match your eyes. Probably look as good on you as it did on Rebecca, maybe even better." Aunt Margaret has been shelving dishes while she talks. Elizabeth stares at her stiff back, watches Aunt Margaret's arms moving swift and sure, putting things back in place as if she believed there was a place for everything.

"Aunt Margaret," Elizabeth says, softly but determined. "How did Rebecca die? I want to know." Aunt Margaret stops in the middle of lifting a blue willow plate. Her head lifts, her breath is sucked in with a hiss. "She's dead, Elizabeth," she says, without turning her head. "What does it matter how?"

"I want to know."

"Well don't go asking your parents. You've been enough trouble since this whole thing started, if you don't mind my saying so. Asking your parents is the last thing you'd better do."

"I'm asking you."

Aunt Margaret turns and takes a careful, angry look at Elizabeth. "We've got so much to do, Elizabeth. Minnie and Clara just sit out there counting money or gossiping about which of the relatives sent the nicest card and I'm left in here doing dishes alone. Can't you give me a hand?" She shoves a dish towel at

Elizabeth but Elizabeth lets it drop to the floor.

"I'm asking you, Aunt Margaret. How did Rebecca die?"

"And I'm saying I don't know."

"You do, you do, you do," Elizabeth screams. "You're a liar, a liar, a liar." She lunges for the wide collar of Aunt Margaret's brown wool dress and pulls it with her hands. The blue willow plate goes crashing to the floor, skids, but does not break. Minnie and Clara fill up the doorway in a minute.

"What's the matter?" they say in unison. "What's wrong?"

"I've just dropped a plate, " Aunt Margaret says, panting, holding Elizabeth as far from her body as she can. "It startled Elizabeth. She's distraught, upset. Aren't we all? If you two want to make yourselves useful, help her get to bed."

And Elizabeth is handed over to Minnie and Clara as if she were a dish being shelved in the cupboard. She is undressed and sponge-bathed and sung to and tucked in with sure but mechanical hands. Elizabeth doesn't say a word.

When Clara and Minnie finally leave her, Elizabeth stares into the dark. Time, which for a few days had blurred and faded into pale and milk-white limits, now installed its black and iron edges once again. And she was inside the edges and Rebecca was somewhere beyond.

"Rebecca? Rebecca? Rebecca?" Elizabeth whispers into the silent dark, her voice soft and urgent. "Rebecca, answer me. Rebecca? It's Elizabeth. Rebecca! Where are you? Answer me, please!"

And in the dark, even the echo of Elizabeth's whisper is silenced.

With flowers the living remember the dead, once a year, sometimes more.

Mary brings her flowers alone, on Easter Sunday afternoons, to her eldest daughter's grave: a lily from the altar, moist ivy from her garden, a dozen daffodils.

Then Mary sits, her back against her daughter's solid stone, alone, while the sun searches slowly between the evergreens, illuminating a name or date or 'blessed' - or a mother keeping watch. In the center of the cemetery, in the midst of rows of polished headstones, surrounded by a tidy fence of rhododendron, Mary sits until the sun disappears behind the distant mountains' edge.

In the silence of the twilight she calls upon her God. "God?" (Can you hear her hopeful doubting voice?) "Why? Why have You..."

Mary in the cemetery, the stones as evenly arranged as squares of checkerboard,sits in the silence listening, her cheek pressed against the letters of the stone. "Blessed are the dead" they say, the words are very clear.

Blessed are the dead.

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